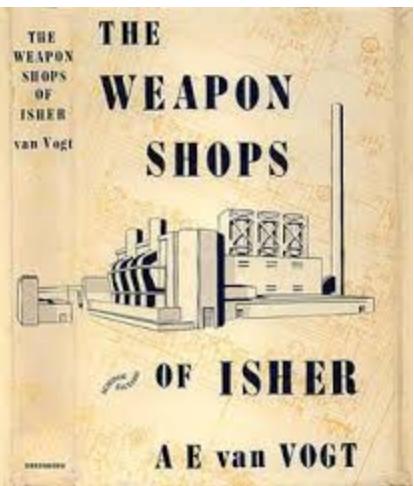


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A.E. van Vogt

THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER



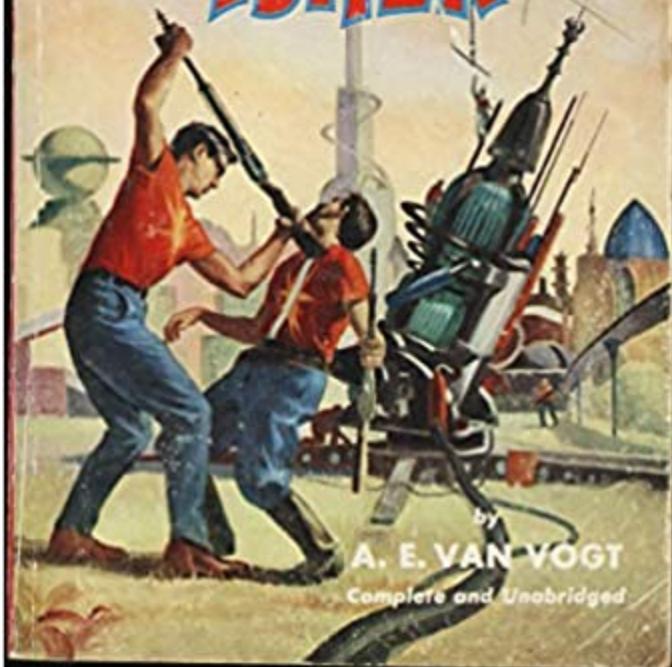


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THE WEAPON SHOPS of ISHER



by

A. E. VAN VOGT

Complete and Unabridged



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BLASTED THROUGH TIME

"Energy-charged?" said McAllister.

The girl was staring at him. "Don't you understand? You've come across seven thousand years of time. You're charged with trillions of trillions of time-energy units. If you should step outside this shop, you'd blow up Imperial City and half a hundred miles of land beyond. . . . You could conceivably destroy the Earth!"

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THE WEAPON SHOPS OFISHER

A.EvanVogt



PUBLISHED BY POCKET BOOKS NEW YORK

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Weapon Shops of Isher is based on and includes the following separately printed short stories and novelettes:

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GULF & WESTERN CORPORATION
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020

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For information address Pocket Books, 1230 Avenue
of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020

ISBN: 0-671-83429-0

First Pocket Books printing August, 1977

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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Printed in the U.S.A.

Alfred Elton Van Vogt

THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER

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First Ace Printing: December 1954

Second Ace Printing: January 1961

Third Ace Printing: November 1969

Fourth Ace Printing: November 1973

Printed in U.S.A.

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**THE WEAPON
SHOPS
OF FISHER**

PROLOGUE

I

MAGICIAN BELIEVED TO HAVE HYPNOTIZED CROWD

June 11, 1951 Police and newspapermen believe that Middle City will shortly be advertised as the next stopping place of a master magician and they are prepared to extend him a hearty welcome if he will condescend to explain exactly how he fooled hundreds of people into believing they saw a strange building, apparently a kind of gunshop.

The building seemed to appear on the space formerly, and still, occupied by Aunt Sally's Lunch and Patterson Tailors. Only employees were inside the two aforementioned shops, and none noticed any untoward event. A large, brightly shining sign featured the front of the gunshop, which had been so miraculously conjured out of nothingness; and the sign constituted the first evidence that the entire scene was nothing but a masterly illusion. For from whichever angle one gazed at it, one seemed to be staring straight at the words, which read:

FINE WEAPONS THE RIGHT TO BUY WEAPONS IS THE
RIGHT TO BE FREE

The window display was made up of an assortment of rather curiously shaped guns, rifles as well as small arms; and a glowing sign in the window stated:

THE FINEST ENERGY WEAPONS IN THE KNOWN
UNIVERSE •

Inspector Clayton of the Investigation Branch attempted to enter the shop, but the door seemed to be locked. A few moments later, C. J. (Chris) McAllister, reporter of the Gazette-Bulletin, tried the door, found that it opened, and entered.

Inspector Clayton attempted to follow him, but discovered that the door was again locked. It is believed that McAllister went through to the back, as several spectators reported seeing him. Immediately after his reappearance, the strange building vanished as abruptly as it had appeared.

Police state they are baffled as to how the master magician created so detailed an illusion for so long a period before so large a crowd. They are prepared to recommend his show, when it comes, without reservations.

(Author's Note: The foregoing account did not mention that the police, dissatisfied with the affair, attempted to contact McAllister for a further interview, but were unable to locate him. Weeks have passed and he has still not been found.

What did happen to McAllister from the instant that he found the door of the gunshop unlocked?)

There was a curious quality about the gunshop door. It was not so much that it opened at his first touch as that, when he pulled, it came away like a weightless thing. McAllister had the impression that the knob had freed itself into his palm.

He stood very still, startled. The thought that came finally had to do with Inspector Clayton who, a minute earlier, had found the door locked. The thought was like a signal. From behind him boomed the voice of the inspector:

"Ah, McAllister, I'll handle this now."

It was dark inside the shop beyond the door, too dark to see anything, and somehow, his eyes wouldn't accustom themselves to the intense gloom. Pure reporter's instinct made him step forward toward the blackness that pressed him beyond the rectangle of door. Out of the corner of one eye, he saw Inspector Clayton's hand reaching for the door handle that his own fingers had let go a moment before. And he knew instantly that if the inspector could prevent it, no reporter would get inside that building. His head was still turned, his gaze more on the police officer than on the darkness in front; and it was as he began another step forward that the remarkable thing happened.

The door handle would not allow Inspector Clayton to touch it. It twisted in some queer way, in some energy way, for it was still there, a strange, blurred shape. The door itself, without visible movement it was so swift, was suddenly touching McAllister's heel. Light, almost weightless, was that touch; and then, before he could think or react to what had happened, the momentum of his forward movement had carried him inside. As he breasted the darkness, there was a sudden, agonized tensing along his nerves. Then the door shut tight, the brief, unexpected agony faded. Ahead was a brightly lit shop; behind were unbelievable things!

For McAllister, the moment that followed was one of blank impression. He stood, body twisted awkwardly, only vaguely conscious of the shop's interior, but tremendously aware in the brief moment before he was interrupted of what lay beyond the transparent panels of the door through which he had just come.

There was no unyielding blackness anywhere, no Inspector Clayton, no muttering crowd of gaping spectators, no dingy row of shops across the way. It was not even the same street. There was no street. Instead, a peaceful park was

visible. Beyond it, brilliant under a noon sun, was the skyline of a vast city. From behind him, a husky, musical, woman's voice said:

"You will be wanting a gun?"

McAllister turned. The movement was automatic reaction to a sound. And because the affair was still like a dream, the city scene faded almost instantly; his mind focused on the young woman who was advancing slowly from the rear section of the store. Briefly, his thought wouldn't come clear. A conviction that he ought to say something was tangled with first impressions of the girl's appearance. She had a slender well-shaped body; her face was creased with a pleasant smile. She had brown eyes, and wavy brown hair. Her simple frock and sandals seemed so normal at first glance that he gave them no further thought. He was able to say:

"What I can't understand is why the police officer, who tried to follow me, couldn't get in. And where is he now?"

To his surprise, the girl's smile became faintly apologetic: "We know that people consider it silly of us to keep harping on that ancient feud." Her voice grew firmer. "We even know how clever the propaganda is that stresses the silliness of our stand. Meanwhile, we never allow any of her men in here. We continue to take our principles very seriously."

She paused as if she expected comprehension from him. But McAllister saw from the slow puzzlement creeping into her eyes that his face must look as blank as the thoughts behind it. Her men! The girl had spoken the words as if she were referring to some personage, and in direct reply to his use of the word, police officer. That meant her men,

whoever she was, were policemen; and they weren't allowed in this gunshop. So the door was hostile, and wouldn't admit them. An emptiness struck into McAllister's mind, matching the hollowness that was beginning to afflict the pit of his stomach, a sense of unplumbed depths, the first staggering conviction that all was not as it should be. The girl was speaking in a sharper tone:

"You mean you know nothing of all this, that for generations the gunmaker's guild has existed in this age of devastating energies as the common man's only protection against enslavement? The right to buy guns" She stopped, her narrowed eyes searching him; then: "Come to think of it, there's something very peculiar about you. Your outlandish clothes, you're not from the northern farm plains are you?"

He shook his head dumbly, more annoyed with his reactions every passing second. But he couldn't help it. A tightness was growing in him now, becoming more unbearable instant by instant, as if somewhere a vital mainspring was being wound to the breaking point.

The young woman went on more swiftly: "And come to think of it, it is astounding that a policeman should have tied the door, and there was no alarm."

Her hand moved. Metal flashed in it, metal as bright as steel in blinding sunlight. There was not the slightest hint of an apology in her voice as she said: "You will stay where you are, sir, until I have called my father. In our business, with our responsibilities, we never take chances. Something is very wrong here."

Curiously, it was at that point that McAllister's mind began to function clearly. The thought that came paralleled hers. How had this gunshop appeared on a 1951 street? How had

he come here into this fantastic world? Something was very wrong indeed.

It was the gun that held his attention. It was a tiny thing, shaped like a pistol, but with three cubes projecting in a half circle from the top of the slightly bulbous firing chamber. He began to feel shaken, looking at it, for that wicked little instrument, glittering there in her browned fingers, was as real as herself.

“Good Heaven,” he whispered. “What the devil kind of a gun is it? Lower that thing and let’s try to find out what all this is about.”

She seemed not to be listening. He noticed that her gaze was flicking to a point on the wall somewhat to his left. He followed her look in time to see seven miniature white lights flash on. Curious lights! He was fascinated by the play of light and shade, the waxing and waning from one tiny globe to the next, a rippling movement of infinitesimal increments and decrements, an incredibly delicate effect of instantaneous reaction to some supersensitive barometer. The lights steadied; his gaze reverted to the girl. To his surprise, she was putting away her gun. She must have noticed his expression.

“It’s all right,” she said coolly. “The automatics are on you now. If we’re wrong about you, we’ll be glad to apologize. Meanwhile, if you’re still interested in buying a gun. I’ll be happy to demonstrate.”

So the automatics were on him. McAllister thought. He felt no relief at the information. Whatever the automatics were, they wouldn’t be working in his favor. The young woman putting away her gun in spite of her suspicions spoke volumes for the efficiency of the new watchdogs. He’d have

to get out of this place, of course. Meanwhile, the girl was assuming that a man who came into a gun-shop would, under ordinary circumstances, want to buy a gun. It struck him, suddenly, that of all the things he could think of, what he most wanted to see was one of those strange guns. There were incredible implications in the very shape of the instruments. Aloud he said:

“Yes, by all means show me.” A thought occurred to him. He added, “I have no doubt your father is somewhere in the background making some sort of study of me.”

The young woman made no move to bring out any weapons. Instead, she stared at him in puzzlement.

“You may not realize it,” she said slowly, “but you have already upset our entire establishment. The lights of the automatics should have gone on the moment father pressed the buttons, as he did when I called him. They didn’t! That’s unnatural, and yet.” her frown deepened. “if you were one of them, how did you get through that door? Is it possible that her scientists have discovered human beings who do not affect the sensitive energies? And that you are but one of many such, sent as an experiment to determine whether or not entrance could be gained? Yet that isn’t logical either. If they had even a hope of success, they wouldn’t risk the chance of throwing away an overwhelming surprise. In that case, you would be the entering wedge of an attack on a vast scale. She is ruthless, she’s brilliant; and she craves complete power over poor fools like you who have no more sense than to worship her and the splendor of the Imperial Court.”

The young woman paused, with the faintest of smiles.
“There I go again, making a political speech. But you can

see that there are at least a few reasons why we should be careful about you."

There was a chair in one corner. McAllister started for it. His mind was calmer. "Look," he began, "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't even know how I came to be in this shop. I agree with you that the whole thing requires explanation, but I mean that differently than you do."

His voice trailed. He had been half lowered over the chair, but instead of sinking into it, he came erect, slowly, like an old, old man. His eyes fixed on lettering that shone above a glass case of guns behind her. He said hoarsely:

"Is that, a calendar?"

She followed his gaze, puzzled. "Yes, it's June 3rd. What's wrong?"

"I don't mean that. I mean." He caught himself with an effort. "I mean those figures above that: I mean, what year is this?"

The girl looked surprised. She started to say something, then stopped and backed away. Finally: "Don't look like that! There's nothing wrong. This is eighty-four of the four thousand seven hundredth year of the Imperial House of Isher. It's quite all right."

II

Very deliberately McAllister sat down, and the conscious wonder came: Exactly how should he feel? Not even surprise came to his aid. The events were beginning to fall into a kind of distorted pattern. The building front superimposed on those two 1951 shops; the way the door

had acted. The great exterior sign with its odd linking of freedom with the right to buy weapons. The actual display of weapons in the window, the finest energy weapons in the known universe! . . . He grew aware that the girl was talking earnestly with a tall, gray-haired man who was standing on the threshold of the door through which she had originally come. There was a tenseness in the way they were talking. Their low-spoken words made a blur of sound in his ears, strange and unsettling. McAllister could not quite analyze the meaning of it until the girl turned, and said:

“What is your name?”

McAllister gave it.

The girl hesitated, then: “Mr. McAllister, my father wants to know what year you’re from!”

The gray-haired man stepped forward. “I’m afraid,” he said gravely, “that there is no time to explain. What has happened is what we gunmakers have feared for generations: that once again would come one who lusted for unlimited power; and who, to attain tyranny, must necessarily seek first to destroy us. Your presence here is a manifestation of the energy force that she has turned against us, something so new that we did not even suspect it was being used against us. But I have no time to waste. Get all the information you can, Lystra, and warn him of his own personal danger.” The man turned. The door closed noiselessly behind his tall figure.

McAllister asked: “What did he mean, personal danger?”

He saw the girl’s brown eyes were uneasy as they rested on him. “It’s hard to explain,” she began in an uncomfortable

voice. "First of all, come to the window and I'll try to make everything clear. It's all very confusing to you, I suppose."

McAllister drew a deep breath. "Now we're getting somewhere."

His alarm was gone. The gray-haired man seemed to know what it was all about. That meant there should be no difficulty getting home again. As for all this danger to the gunmaker's guild, that was their worry, not his. He stepped forward, closer to the girl. To his amazement, she cringed away as if he had threatened her. As he stared blankly, she laughed humorlessly; and finally she said:

"Don't think I'm being silly, don't be offended, but for your life's sake, don't touch any human body you might come in contact with."

McAllister was conscious of a chill. Then, suddenly, he felt a surge of impatience at the fear that showed in the girl's face. "Now look," he began, "I want to get things clear. We can talk here without danger, providing I don't touch, or come near you. Is that right?"

She nodded. "The floor, the walls, every piece of furniture, in fact the entire shop is made of non-conducting material."

McAllister had a sense of being balanced on a tight rope over a bottomless abyss. He forced calm onto his mind. "Let's start," he said, "at the beginning. How did you and your father know that I was not of." he paused before the odd phrase, then went on. "of this time?"

"Father photographed you," the girl said. "He photographed the contents of your pockets. That was how he first found out what was the matter. You see, the sensitive energies themselves become carriers of the

energy, with which you're charged. That's what was wrong. That's why the automatics wouldn't focus on you, and."

"Energy charged?" said McAllister.

The girl was staring at him. "Don't you understand?" she gasped. "You've come across seven thousand years of time. And of all the energies in the universe, time is the most potent. You're charged with trillions of trillions of time-energy units. If you should step outside this shop, you'd blow up Imperial City and half a hundred miles of land beyond.

"You!" she finished on an unsteady, upward surge of her voice. "you could conceivably destroy the Earth!"

He hadn't noticed the mirror before. Funny, too, because it was large enough, at least eight feet high, and directly in front of him on the wall where, a minute before (he could have sworn) had been solid metal.

"Look at yourself," the girl was saying soothingly. "There's nothing so steady as one's own image. Actually, your body is taking the mental shock very well."

He stared at his image. There was a paleness in the lean face that stared back at him. But his body was not actually shaking as the whirling in his mind had suggested. He grew aware again of the girl. She was standing with a finger on one of a series of wall switches. Abruptly, he felt better. "Thank you," he said quietly. "I certainly needed that."

She smiled encouragingly; and he was able now to be amazed at her conflicting personality. There had been on the one hand her inability a few minutes earlier to get to the point of the danger, an incapacity for explaining things with words. Yet obviously her action with the mirror showed

a keen understanding of human psychology. He said: "The problem now is, from your point of view, to circumvent this Isher woman and get me back to 1951 before I blow up the Earth of ... of whatever year this is."

The girl nodded. "Father says that you can be sent back, but as for the rest, watch!"

He had no time for relief at the knowledge that he could be returned to his own time. She pressed another button. Instantly, the mirror was gone into metallic wall. Another button clicked. The wall vanished. Before him stretched a park similar to the one he had already seen through the front door, obviously an extension of the same gardenlike vista. Trees were there, and flowers, and green, green grass in the sun.

One vast building, as high as it was long, towered massively dark against the sky and dominated the entire horizon. It was a good quarter mile away; and incredibly, it was at least that long and that high. Neither near that monstrous building, nor in the park, was a living person visible. Everywhere was evidence of man's dynamic labor, but no men, no movement. Even the trees stood motionless in that breathless sunlit day.

"Watch!" said the girl again, more softly.

There was no click this time. She made an adjustment on one of the buttons, and the view was no longer so clear. It wasn't that the sun had dimmed its bright intensity. It wasn't even that glass was visible where a moment before there had been nothing. There was still no apparent substance between them and that gemlike park. But the park was no longer deserted.

Scores of men and machines swarmed out there. McAllister stared in amazement; and then as the sense of illusion faded, and the dark menace of those men penetrated, his emotion changed to dismay.

"Why," he said at last, "those men are soldiers, and the machines are."

"Energy guns!" she said. "That's always been their problem. How to get their weapons close enough to our shops to destroy us. It isn't that the guns are now powerful over a very great distance. Even the rifles we sell can kill unprotected life over a distance of miles, but our gun-shops are so heavily fortified that, to destroy us, they must use their biggest cannon at point-blank range. In the past, they could never do that because we own the surrounding park, and our alarm system was perfect, until now. The new energy they're using affects none of our protective instruments: and, what is infinitely worse, affords them a perfect shield against our own guns. Invisibility, of course, has long been known, but if you hadn't come, we would have been destroyed without ever knowing what happened."

"But," McAllister exclaimed sharply, "what are you going to do? They're still out there, working."

Her brown eyes burned with a fierce, yellow flame. "My father has warned the guild. And individual members have now discovered that similar invisible guns are being set up by invisible men outside their shops. The council will meet shortly to discuss defenses."

Silently, McAllister watched the soldiers connecting what must have been invisible cables that led to the vast buildings in the background; foot thick cables that told of

the titanic power that was to be unleashed on the tiny weapon shop. There was nothing to be said. The reality out there overshadowed sentences and phrases. Of all the people here, he was the most useless, his opinion the least worth while. He must have said so, but he did not realize that until the familiar voice of the girl's father came from one side of him.

"You're quite mistaken, Mr. McAllister. Of all the people here you are the most valuable. Through you, we discovered that the Isher were actually attacking us. Furthermore, our enemies do not know of your existence, therefore have not yet realized the full effect produced by the new blanketing energy they have used. You, accordingly, constitute the unknown factor. We must make immediate use of you."

The man looked older, McAllister thought. There were lines of strain in his lean, sallow face as he turned to his daughter, and his voice, when he spoke, was edged with sharpness: "Lystra, No. 7!"

As the girl's fingers touched the seventh button, her father explained swiftly to McAllister, "The guild supreme council is holding an immediate emergency session. We must choose the most likely method of attacking the problem, and concentrate individually and collectively on that method. Regional conversations are already in progress, but only one important idea has been put forward as yet and, ah, gentlemen!"

He spoke past McAllister, who turned with a start. Men were coming out of the solid wall, lightly, easily, as if it were a door and they were stepping across a threshold. One, two, three, thirty.

They were grim-faced men, all except one who glanced at McAllister, started to walk past, and then stopped with a half-amused smile.

“Don’t look so blank. How else do you think we could have survived these many years if we hadn’t been able to transmit material objects through space? The Isher police have always been only too eager to blockade our sources of supply. Incidentally, my name is Cadron, Peter Cadron!”

McAllister nodded in a perfunctory manner. He was no longer genuinely impressed by the new machines. Here were the end-products of the machine age; science and invention so advanced that men made scarcely a move that did not affect, or was not affected by, a machine. A heavy-faced man near him said: “We have gathered here because it is obvious that the source of the new energy is the great building just outside this shop.”

He motioned toward the wall which had been a mirror and then the window through which McAllister had gazed at the monstrous structure in question. The speaker went on: “We’ve known, ever since the building was completed five years ago, that it was a power building aimed against us; and now from it new energy has flown out to engulf the world, immensely potent energy so strong that it broke the very tensions of time, fortunately only at this nearest gunshop. Apparently, it weakens when transmitted over distance.”

“Look, Dresley,” came a curt interruption from a small, thin man, “what good is all this preamble? You have been examining the various plans put forward by regional groups. Is there, or isn’t there, a decent one among them?”

Dresley hesitated. To McAllister's surprise, the man's eyes fixed doubtfully on him, his heavy face worked for a moment, then hardened. "Yes, there is a method, but it depends on compelling our friend from the past to take a great risk. You all know what I am referring to. It will gain us the time we need."

"Eh?" said McAllister, and stood stunned as all eyes turned to stare at him.

It struck McAllister that what he needed again was the mirror to prove to himself that his body was putting up a good front. His gaze flicked over the faces of the men. The gunmakers made a confusing pattern in the way they sat, or stood, or leaned against glass cases of shining guns; and there seemed to be fewer than he had previously counted. One, two, twenty-eight, including the girl. He could have sworn there had been thirty-two. His eyes moved on, just in time to see the door of the back room closing. Four of the men had gone to whatever lay beyond that door.

He shook his head, puzzled. And then, consciously drawing his attention back, stared thoughtfully at the faces before him. He said: "I can't understand how any one of you could even think of compulsion. According to you, I'm loaded with energy. I may be wrong, but if any of you should try to thrust me back down the chute of time, 'or even touch me, that energy in me would do devastating things."

"You're damned right!" chimed in a young man. He barked irritably at Dresley: "How the devil did you ever come to make such a psychological blunder? You know that McAllister will have to do as we want to save himself; and he'll have to do it fast!"

Dresley grunted. "Hell," he said, "the truth is that we have no time to waste in explanation and I just figured that he might scare easily. I see, however, that we're dealing with an intelligent man."

McAllister's eyes narrowed over the group. This was phony. He said sharply, "And don't give me any soft soap about being intelligent. You fellows are sweating blood. You'd shoot your own grandmothers and trick me into the bargain, because the world you think right is at stake. What's this plan of yours that you were going to compel me to participate in?"

It was the young man who replied. "You are to be given insulated clothes and sent back to your own time."

He paused. McAllister said: "That sounds okay so far. What's the catch?"

"There is no catch!"

McAllister stared. "Now, look here," he began, "don't give me any of that. If it's as simple as that, how the devil am I going to be helping you against the Isher energy?"

The young man scowled blackly at Dresley. "You see," he said, "you've made him suspicious with that talk of yours about compulsion." He faced McAllister. "What we have in mind is an application of a sort of an energy lever and fulcrum principle. You are to be the weight at the long end of a kind of energy 'crowbar,' which lifts the greater weight at the short end. You will go back five thousand years in time; the machine in the great building, to which your body is tuned and which has caused all this trouble, will move ahead in time several months."

"In that way," interrupted another man before McAllister could speak, "we should have time to find another counter agent. There must be a solution, else our enemies would not have acted so secretly. Well, what do you think?"

McAllister walked slowly over to the chair that he had occupied previously. His mind was turning at furious speed, but he knew with a grim foreboding that he hadn't the technical knowledge necessary to safeguard himself. He said slowly:

"As I see it, this is supposed to work something like a pump handle. The lever principle, the old idea that if you had a lever long enough, and a suitable fulcrum, you could move the Earth out of its orbit."

"Exactly!" It was the heavy-faced Dresley who spoke. "Only this works in time. You go five thousand years, the building goes."

His voice faded, his eagerness drained from him as he caught the expression in McAllister's face.

"Look!" said McAllister. "There's nothing more pitiful than a bunch of honest men engaged in an act of dishonesty. You're strong men, the intellectual type, who've spent your lives enforcing an idealistic conception. You've always told yourselves that if The occasion should ever require it, you would not hesitate to make drastic sacrifices. But you're not fooling anybody. What's the catch?"

It was startling to have the suit thrust at him. He had noticed the men emerge from the back room; and it came as a shock to realize that they had gone for the insulated clothes before they could have known that he would use them. McAllister stared grimly at Peter Cadron, who held

the dull, grayish, limp thing toward him, and said in a tight voice:

"Get into this, and get going! It's a matter of minutes, man! When those guns out there start spraying energy, you won't be alive to argue about our honesty."

Still he hesitated. The room seemed insufferably hot. Perspiration streaked down his cheeks and he felt sick with uncertainty. Somewhere in the background a man was saying:

"Our first purpose must be to gain time, then we must establish new shops in communities where they cannot be easily attacked. Simultaneously, we must contact every Imperial potential who can help us directly or indirectly, and finally we must."

The voice went on, but McAllister heard no more. His frantic gaze fell on the girl, standing silent and subdued near the front door. He strode toward her; and either his glare or presence was frightening, for she cringed and turned white.

"Look!" he said. "I'm in this as deep as hell. What's the risk in this thing? I've got to feel that I have some chance. Tell me, what's the catch?"

The girl was gray now, almost as gray and dead looking as the suit Peter Cadron was holding. "It's the friction," she mumbled finally, "you may not get all the way back to 1951. You see, you'll be a sort of 'weight' and."

McAllister whirled away from her. He climbed into the soft almost flimsy suit, crowding the overall-like shape over his neatly pressed clothes. "It comes tight over the head, doesn't it?"

"Yes!" It was Lystra's father who answered. "As soon as you pull that zipper shut, the suit will become completely invisible. To outsiders, it will seem just as if you have your ordinary clothes on. The suit is fully equipped. You could live on the moon inside it."

"What I don't get," complained McAllister, "is why I have to wear it. I got here all right without it." He frowned. His words had been automatic, but abruptly a thought came. "Just a minute," he said, "what becomes of the energy with which I'm charged when I'm bottled i up in this insulation?"

He saw by the stiffening expressions of those around him that he had touched on a vast subject.

"So that's it!" he snapped. "The insulation is to prevent me losing any of that energy. That's how it can make a 'weight.' I have no doubt there is a connection from this suit to that other machine. Well, it's not too late."

With a desperate twist, he tried to jerk aside, to evade the clutching hands of the four men who leaped at him. But they had him instantly, and their grips on him were strong beyond his power to break. The fingers of Peter Cadron jerked the zipper tight, and Peter Cadron said:

"Sorry, but when we went into that back room, we also dressed in insulated clothing. That's why you couldn't hurt us. And remember this: There's no certainty that you are being sacrificed. The fact that there is no crater in our Earth proves that you did not explode in the past, and that you solved the problem in some other way. Now, somebody open the door, quick!"

Irresistibly, he was carried forward. And then.

"Wait!"

It was the girl. Her eyes glittered like dark jewels and in her fingers was the tiny, mirror-bright gun she had pointed in the beginning at McAllister. The little group hustling McAllister stopped as if they had been struck. He was scarcely aware. For him there was only the girl, and the way the muscles of her lips were working and the way her voice suddenly cried: "This is utter outrage. Are we such cowards, is it possible that the spirit of liberty can survive only through a shoddy act of murder and gross defiance of the rights of the individual? I say no! Mr. McAllister must have the protection of the hypnotism treatment; surely so brief a delay will not be fatal."

"Lystra!" It was her father; and McAllister realized by his swift movement how quickly the older man grasped every aspect of the situation. He stepped forward and took the gun from his daughter's fingers, the only man in the room, McAllister thought, who could dare approach her in that moment with the certainty she would not fire. For hysteria was in every line of her face; and the tears that followed showed how dangerous her stand might have been against the others.

Strangely, not for a moment had hope come. The entire action seemed divorced from his life and his thought, there was only the observation of it. He stood there for a seeming eternity, and, when emotion finally came, it was surprise that he was not being hustled to his doom. With the surprise came awareness that Peter Cadron had let go of his arm, and stepped clear of him.

The man's eyes were calm, his head held proudly erect. He said, "Your daughter is right, sir. At this point we rise above our fears, and we say to this unhappy young man: 'Have courage! You will not be forgotten. We can guarantee nothing, cannot even state exactly what will happen to you.'

But we say, if it lies in our power to help you, that help you shall have.' And now, we must protect you from the devastating psychological pressures that would otherwise destroy you, simply but effectively."

Too late, McAllister noticed that the others had turned their faces away from that extraordinary wall, the wall that had already displayed so vast a versatility. He did not even see who pressed the activating button for what followed.

There was a flash of dazzling light. For an instant he felt as if his mind had been laid bare; and against that nakedness the voice of Peter Cadron pressed like some engraving stamp: "To retain your self-control and your sanity, this is your hope; this you will do in spite of everything! And, for your own sake, speak of your experience only to scientists or to those in authority whom you feel will understand and help. Good luck!"

So strong remained the effect of that brief flaring light that he felt only vaguely the touch of their hands on him, propelling him.

He felt himself falling.

Chapter I

The village at night made a curiously timeless picture. Fara walked contentedly beside his wife along the street. The air was like wine; and he was thinking dimly of the artist who had come up from Imperial City, and made what the telestats called, he remembered the phrase vividly. "a symbolic painting reminiscent of a scene in the electrical age of seven thousand years ago."

Fara believed that utterly. The street before him with its weedless, automatically tended gardens, its shops set well back among the flowers, its perpetually hard, grassy sidewalks, and its street lamps that glowed from every pore of their structure, this was a restful paradise where time had stood still.

And it was like being a part of life that the great artist's picture of this quiet, peaceful scene before him was now in the collection of the empress herself. She had praised it, and naturally the thrice-blest artist had immediately and humbly begged her to accept it. What a joy it must be to be able to offer personal homage to the glorious, the divine, the sereneiy gracious and lovely Innelda Isher, one hundred eightieth of her line.

As they walked, Fara half turned to his wife. In the dim light of the nearest street lamp, her kindly, still youthful face was almost lost in shadow. He murmured softly, instinctively muting his voice to harmonize with the pastel shades of night: "She said, our empress said , that our little village of Glay seemed to her to have in it all the wholesomeness, the gentleness, that constitutes the finest qualities of her

people. Wasn't that a wonderful thought, Creel? She must be a marvelously understanding woman."

They had come to a side street, and what he saw about a hundred and fifty feet along it stopped his words. "Look!" Fara said hoarsely.

He pointed with rigid arm and finger at a sign that glowed in the night, a sign that read:

fine weapons

the right to buy weapons is the

RIGHT TO BE FREE

Fara had a strange, empty feeling as he stared at the blazing sign. He saw that other villagers were gathering. He said finally, huskily, "I've heard of these shops. They're places of infamy against which the government of the empress will act one of these days. They're built in hidden factories and then transported whole to towns like ours and set up in gross defiance of property rights. That one wasn't there an hour ago." His face hardened. His voice had a harsh edge in it as he said, "Creel, go home."

He was surprised when Creel did not move off at once. All their married life, she had had a pleasing habit of obedience that had made life a wonderful thing. He saw that she was looking at him wide-eyed, and that it was a timid alarm that held her there. She said, "Fara, what do you intend to do? You're not thinking of."

"Go home!" Her fear brought out all the determination in his nature. "We're not going to let such a monstrous thing desecrate our village. Think of it." his voice shivered against the appalling thought. "this fine, old-fashioned community,

which we had resolved always to keep exactly as the empress has it in her picture gallery, debauched now, ruined by this . . . this thing, But we won't have it; that's all there is to it."

Creel's voice came softly out of the half-darkness of the street corner, the timidity gone from it. "Don't do anything rash, Far a. Remember it is not the first new building to come into Glay, since the picture was painted."

Fara was silent. This was a quality of his wife of which he did not approve, this reminding him unnecessarily of unpleasant facts. He knew exactly what she meant. The gigantic, multitentacled corporation, Automatic Atomic Motor Repair Shops, Inc., had come in under the laws of the State with their flashy building, against the wishes of the village council, and had already taken half of Fara's repair business.

"That's different!" Fara growled finally. "In the first place people will discover in good time that these new automatic repairers do a poor job. In the second place it's fair competition. But this weapon shop is a defiance of all the decencies that make life under the House of Isher such a joy. Look at the hypocritical sign: 'The right to buy weapons.' Aaaaahh!" He broke off with, "Go home, Creel. We'll see to it that they sell no weapons in this town."

He watched the slender woman-shape move off into the shadows. She was halfway across the street when Fara called after her: "And if you see that son of ours hanging around some street corner, take him home. He's got to learn to stop staying out so late at night."

The shadowed figure of his wife did not turn; and after watching her for a moment moving against the dim

background of softly glowing street lights, Fara twisted on his heel and walked swiftly toward the shop. The crowd was growing larger every minute, and the night air pulsed with excited voices. Beyond doubt, here was the biggest thing that had ever happened to the village of Glay.

The sign of the weapon shop was, he saw, a normal-illusion affair. No matter what his angle of view, he was always looking straight at it. When he paused in front of the great display window, the words had pressed back against the store front, and were staring unwinkingly down at him. Fara sniffed once more at the meaning of the slogan, then turned to the sign in the window. It read:

THE FINEST ENERGY WEAPONS IN THE KNOWN UNIVERSE

A spark of interest struck fire inside Fara. He gazed at the brilliant display of guns, fascinated in spite of himself. The weapons were of every size, ranging from tiny little finger pistols to express rifles. They were made of every one of the light, hard, ornamental substances: glittering glassein, the colorful but opaque Ordine plastic, viridescent magnesitic berylium. And others. It was the deadly extent of the destructive display that brought a chill to Fara. So many weapons for the little village of Glay, where not more than two people to his knowledge had guns, and those only for hunting. Why, the thing was absurd, fantastically mischievous, and threatening.

Somewhere behind Fara a man said: "It's right on Lan Harris' lot. Good joke on that old scoundrel. Will he raise a row!"

There was a titter from several men that made an odd patch of sound on the warm, fresh air. And Fara saw that

the man had spoken the truth. The weapon shop had a forty-foot frontage. And it occupied the center of the green, gardenlike lot of tight-fisted old Harris. Fara frowned. Clever, these weapon shop people, selecting the property of the most disliked man in town, giving everybody an agreeable titillation. But the cunning of it made it vital that the trick should not succeed. He was still scowling anxiously when he saw the plump figure of Mel Dale, the mayor. Fara edged toward him hurriedly, touched his hat respectfully, and said, "Where's Jor?"

"Here." The village constable elbowed his way through a little crowd of men. "Any plans?" he said.

"There's only one plan," said Fara boldly. "Go in and arrest them."

The two men looked at each other, then at the ground. It was the big constable who answered shortly, "Door's locked. And nobody answers our pounding. I was just going to suggest we let the matter ride until morning."

"Nonsense!" Astonishment made Fara impatient. "Get an ax and we'll break down the door. Delay will only encourage such riffraff to resist. We don't want their kind in our village for a single night. Isn't that so?"

There was a hasty nod of agreement from everybody in his immediate vicinity. Too hasty. Fara looked around puzzled at eyes that lowered before his level gaze. He thought: "They are all scared. And unwilling." Before he could speak, Constable Jor said:

"I guess you haven't heard about those doors or these shops. From all accounts you can't break into them."

It struck Fara with a sudden pang that it was he who would have to act here. He said, "I'll get my atomic cutting machine from my shop. That'll fix them. Have I your permission to do that, Mr. Mayor?"

In the glow of the weapon shop window, the plump man was sweating visibly. He pulled out a handkerchief, and wiped his forehead. He said: "Maybe I'd better call the commander of the Imperial garrison at Ferd, and ask them."

"No!" Fara recognized evasion when he saw it. Suddenly, the conviction came that all the strength in this village was in him. "We must act ourselves. Other communities have let these people get in because they took no decisive action. We've got to resist to the limit. Beginning this minute. Well?"

The mayor's "All right!" was scarcely more than a sigh of sound. But it was all Fara needed. He called out his intention to the crowd, and then, as he pushed his way out of the mob, he saw his son standing with some other young men staring at the window display.

Fara called: "Cayle, come and help me with the machine."

Cayle neither stirred nor turned. Fara paused, half inclined to make an issue of it, then hurried on, seething. That wretched boy! One of these days he'd have to take firm action there. Or he'd have a no-good on his hands.

The energy was soundless and smooth. There was no sputter, no fireworks. It glowed with a soft, pure white light, almost caressing the metal panels of the door. But after a minute it had still not affected the material. Fara refused to believe the failure, and played the boundlessly potent energy on that resisting wall. When he finally shut off his

machine, he was perspiring freely. "I don't understand it," he gasped. "Why, no metal is supposed to stand up against a steady flood of atomic force. Even the hard metal plates used inside the blast chamber of a motor take the explosions in what is called infinite series, so that each one has unlimited rest. That's the theory, but actually steady running crystallizes the whole plate after a few months."

"It's as Jor told you," said the mayor. "These weapon shops are big. They spread right through the empire, and they don't recognize the empress"

Fara shifted his feet on the hard grass, disturbed. He didn't like this kind of talk. It sounded sacrilegious. And besides it was nonsense. It must be. Before he could speak, a man in the crowd said, "I've heard it said that that door will open only to those who cannot harm the people inside."

The words shocked Fara out of his daze. His failure had had a bad psychological effect. He said sharply, "That's ridiculous! If there were doors like that, we'd all have them. We."

What stopped his words was the sudden realization that he had not seen anybody try to open the door; and with all this reluctance around him it was quite possible that no one had tried. He stepped forward, grasped at the doorknob and pulled. The door opened with an unnatural weightlessness that gave him the fleeting impression that the knob had come loose into his hand. With a gasp, Fara jerked the door wide open.

"Ior," he yelled, "get in!"

The constable made a distorted movement, distorted by what must have been a will to caution, followed by the instant realization that he could not hold back before so

many. He leaped awkwardly toward the open door. And it closed in his face.

Fara stared stupidly at his hand, which was still clenched. And then, slowly, a thrill coursed along his nerves. The knob had withdrawn. It had twisted, become viscous, and slipped amorphously from his straining fingers. Even the memory of the sensation gave him a feeling of unnormal things. He grew aware that the crowd was watching with silent intentness. Fara reached angrily for the knob, but this time the handle neither turned nor yielded in any way. The obstacle brought his determination back in force. He motioned to the constable.

“Go back, Jor, while I pull.”

The man retreated, but it did no good. And tugging did not help. The door would not open. Somewhere in the crowd, a man said darkly, “It decided to let you in, then it changed its mind.”

“What foolishness are you talking!” Fara spoke violently. “It changed its mind. Are you crazy? A door has no sense.”

Fear put a quaver into his voice. Shame at his alarm made him bold beyond his normal caution. Fara faced the shop grimly. The building loomed there under the night sky, in itself bright as day, alien and menacing, and no longer easily conquerable. He wondered what the soldiers of the empress would do if they were invited to act. And, suddenly, he foresaw flashingly that even they would be able to do nothing. Fara was conscious of horror that such an idea could enter his mind. He shut his brain tight.

“The door opened for me once,” he said wildly. “It will open again.”

It did. Gently, without resistance, with that same sensation of weightlessness, the strange, sensitive door followed the tug of his fingers. Beyond the threshold was dimness, a wide, darkened alcove. Behind him, Mayor Dale said:

“Fara, don’t be a fool. What will you do inside?”

Fara was amazed to realize that he had stepped across the threshold. He turned, startled, and stared at the blur of faces. “Why?” he began blankly, then he brightened. “Why, I’ll buy a gun, of course.”

The brilliance of his reply, the cunning implicit in it, dazzled him for half a minute longer. The mood yielded slowly as he found himself in the dimly lighted interior of the weapon shop.

Chapter II

It was preternaturally quiet inside. No sound penetrated from the night out of which he had come. Fara walked forward gingerly on a carpeted floor that deadened his footsteps. His eyes accustomed themselves to the soft lighting, which came like a reflection from the walls and ceiling. He had expected ultranormalness. The ordinariness of the atomic lighting acted like a tonic to his tensed nerves. He glanced around with gathering confidence. The place looked normal enough. It was a shop, scantily furnished. There were showcases on the walls and on the floor, lovely things, but nothing unusual, and not many of them, a dozen. There was in addition a double door leading to a back room.

Fara tried to keep one eye on that door as he examined several showcases, each with three or four weapons either mounted or arranged in boxes or holsters. With narrowed eyes, he estimated his chances of grabbing one of the weapons from a case, and then, the moment someone came, force him outside where Jor would perform the arrest. Behind him, a man said quietly, "You wish to buy a gun?"

Fara turned with a jump. Brief rage flooded him at the way his plan had been wrecked by the arrival of the clerk. The anger died as he saw that the clerk was a fine looking, silver-haired man, older than himself. That was disconcerting. Fara had an immense and almost automatic respect for age. He said at last, lamely, "Yes, yes, a gun."

"For what purpose?" said the man in his quiet voice. Fara could only look at him. He wanted to get mad. He wanted to tell these people what he thought of them.

But the age of this representative locked his tongue. He managed speech with an effort of will. "For hunting." The plausible words stiffened his mind. "Yes, definitely for hunting. There is a lake to the north of here," he went on more fulsomely, "and."

He stopped, scowling at the extent of his dishonesty. He was not prepared to go so deeply into prevarication. He said curtly, "For hunting."

Fara was himself again. He hated the man for having put him so completely at a disadvantage. With smoldering eyes he watched the old fellow click open a showcase and take out a green-shining rifle. As the man faced him, weapon in hand, Fara was thinking: "Pretty clever, having an old man as a front." It was the same kind of cunning that had made them choose the property of Miser Harris. He reached for the gun; but the man held it out of his reach.

"Before I can even let you test this," he said, "I am compelled by the by-laws of the weapon shops to inform you under what circumstances you may purchase a gun."

So they had private regulations. What a system of psychological tricks to impress the gullible.

"We weapon makers," the clerk was saying mildly, "have evolved guns that can, in their particular range destroy any machine or object made of what is called matter. Thus whoever possesses one of our weapons is more than a match for any soldier of the empress. I say more because each gun is the center of a field of force which acts as a perfect screen against immaterial destructive forces. That screen offers no resistance to clubs or spears or bullets, or other material substances, but it would require a small

atomic cannon to penetrate the superb barrier it creates around its owner.

"You will readily comprehend," the man went on, "that such a potent weapon could not be allowed to fall, unmodified, into irresponsible hands. Accordingly, no gun purchased from us may be used for aggression or murder. In the case of the hunting rifle, only such specified game birds and animals as we may from time to time list in our display windows may be shot. Finally, no weapon can be resold without our approval. Is that clear?"

Far a nodded. For the moment, speech was impossible to him. He wondered if he ought to laugh out loud, or curse the man for daring to insult his intelligence. So the gun mustn't be used for murder or robbery. So only certain birds and animals could be shot. And as for reselling it, suppose, suppose he bought this thing, took a trip of a thousand miles, and offered it to some wealthy stranger for two credits, who would ever know? Or suppose he held up a stranger. Or shot him. How would the weapon shop ever find out? He grew aware that the gun was being held out to him stock first. He took it, and had to fight the impulse to turn the muzzle directly on the old man.

"How does it work?" he asked.

"You simply aim it, and pull the trigger. Perhaps you would like to try it on a target we have."

Fara swung the gun up. "Yes," he said triumphantly, "and you're it. Now, just get over there to the front door, and then outside." He raised his voice. "And if anybody's thinking of coming through the back door, I've got that covered, too." He motioned jerkily at the clerk. "Quick now, move! I'll shoot! I swear I will."

The man was cool, unflustered. "I have no doubt you would. When we decided to attune the door so that you could enter despite your hostility, we assumed the capacity for homicide. However, this is our party. You had better adjust yourself accordingly, and look behind you."

There was silence. Finger on trigger, Fara stood moveless. Dim thoughts came of all the half-things he had heard in his days about the weapon shops; that they had secret supporters in every district, that they had a private and ruthless hidden government, and that once you got into their clutches, the only way out was death. But what finally came clear was a mind picture of himself. Fara Clark, family man, faithful subject of the empress, standing here in this dimly lighted store, deliberately fighting so vast and menacing an organization. He forced courage into his sagging muscles. He said, "You can't fool me by pretending there's someone behind me. Now, get to that door."

The firm eyes of the old man were looking past him. The man said quietly, "Well, Rad, have you all the data?"

"Enough for a primary," said a young man's voice behind Fara. "Type A-7 conservative. Good average intelligence, but a Monaric development peculiar to small towns. One-sided outlook fostered by the Imperial schools present in exaggerated form. Extremely honest. Reason would be useless. Emotional approach would require extended treatment. I see no reason why we should bother. Let him live his life as it suits him."

"If you think," Fara said shakily, "that the trick voice is going to make me turn, you're crazy. That's the left wall of the building. I know there's no one there."

"I'm all in favor, Rad," said the old man, "of letting him live his life. But he was the prime mover of the crowd outside. I think he should be discouraged."

"We'll advertise his presence," said Rad. "He'll spend the rest of his life denying the charge."

Fara's confidence in the gun had faded so far that, as he listened in puzzled uneasiness to the incomprehensible conversation, he forgot it completely.

The old man said persistently: "I think a little emotion might have a long-run effect. Show him the palace."

Palace! The word tore Fara out of his paralysis. "See here," he began, "I can see now that you lied to me. This gun isn't loaded at all. It's."

His voice failed him. His body went rigid. There was no gun in his hand.

"Why, you?" he began wildly. And stopped again. His mind heaved with imbalance. He fought off the spinning sensation, thought finally, tremblingly: Somebody must have sneaked the gun from him. That meant there was someone behind him. The voice was no mechanical thing. He started to turn. And couldn't. He struggled, pushing with his muscles. And couldn't turn, couldn't move, couldn't budge. The room was growing curiously dark. He had difficulty seeing the old man. He would have shrieked then if he could. Because the weapon shop was gone.

He was standing in the sky above an immense city. Standing in the sky, and nothing around him but air, and blue summer heaven, and the city a mile, two miles below. His breath seemed solidly embedded in his lungs. Sanity came back as the remote awareness impinged on his mind that he

was actually standing on a hard floor, and that the city must be a picture somehow focused directly into his eyes.

For the first time, with a start, Fara recognized the metropolis below. It was the city of dreams, Imperial City, Capital of the glorious Empress Isher. From his great height he could see the grounds of the silver palace, the Imperial residence itself. The last tendrils of his fear were fading now before a gathering fascination and wonder. The fear vanished as he recognized with a thrill that the palace was drawing nearer at tremendous speed. "Show him the palace!" they had said. The glittering roof flashed straight at his face. The solid metal of it passed through him.

His first sense of imminent and mind shaking desecration came as the picture paused in a huge room, where a score of men sat around a table at the head of which sat a young woman. The inexorable, sacrilegious, limit-lessly powered cameras that were doing the photographing swung across the table and caught the woman full face.

It was a handsome face, but there was passion twisting it now, as she leaned forward and said in a voice at once familiar, how often Fara had heard its calm, measured tones on the telestats, and distorted. Distorted by anger and an insolent certainty of command. That caricature of a beloved voice slashed across the silence as clearly as if he were there in the great room.

"I want that traitor killed, do you understand? I don't care how you do it, but I want to hear by tomorrow night that he is dead."

The picture snapped off and instantly Fara was back in the weapon shop. He stood for a moment, swaying, fighting to accustom his eyes to the dimness. His first emotion was

contempt at the simpleness of the trickery. A motion picture. What kind of a fool did they think he was, to swallow something as transparently unreal as that? Abruptly, the appalling depravity of the scheme, the indescribable wickedness of what was being attempted here brought red rage.

"Why, you scum!" he flared. "So you've got somebody to act the part of the empress, trying to pretend that, Why, you?"

"That will do," said the voice of Rad. Fara shook as a big young man walked into his line of vision. The alarmed thought came that people who would besmirch so vilely the character of her imperial majesty would hot hesitate to do physical damage to Fara Clark. The young man went on in a steely tone, "We do not pretend that what you saw was taking place this instant in the palace. That would be too much of a coincidence. But it was taken two days ago. The woman is the empress. The man whose death she ordered is a former adviser whom she considered a weakling. He was found dead in his apartment last night. His name, if you care to look it up in the news files, was Banton Vickers. However, let that pass. We're finished with you."

"But I'm not finished," Fara said in a thick voice. "I've never heard or seen so much infamy in all my life. If you think this town is through with you, you're crazy. We'll have a guard on this place day and night, and nobody will get in or out."

"That will do." It was the silver-haired man. "The examination has been most interesting. As an honest man, you may call on us if you are ever in trouble. That is all. Leave through the side door."

It was all. Impalpable forces grabbed him, and he was shoved at a door that appeared miraculously in the wall,

where seconds before had been the palace. He found himself standing in a flower garden, and there was a crowd to his left. He recognized his fellow townsmen, and that he was outside.

The nightmare was over. As he entered his house half an hour later, Creel said. "Where's the gun?"

"The gun?" Fara stared at his wife.

"It said over the 'stat a few minutes ago that you were the first customer of the new weapon shop."

Fara stood, remembering what the young man had said: "We'll advertise his presence." He thought in agony: His reputation! Not that his was a great name, but he had long believed with a quiet pride that Fara Clark's motor repair shop was widely known in the community and countryside. First, his private humiliation inside the shop. And now this lying to people who didn't know why he had gone into the store.

He hurried to the telestat and called Mayor Dale. His hopes crashed as the plump man said:

"I'm sorry, Fara. I don't see how you can have free time on the telestat. You'll have to pay for it. They did."

"They did!" Fara wondered if he sounded as empty as he felt.

"And they've paid Lan Harris for his lot. The old man asked top price, and got it. He phoned me to transfer the title."

"Oh!" Fara's world was shattering. "You mean nobody's going to do anything? What about the Imperial garrison at Ferd?"

Dimly, he was aware of the mayor mumbling something about the empress' soldiers refusing to interfere in civilian matters. "Civilian matters!" Fara exploded. "You mean these people are just going to be allowed to come here whether we want them or not, illegally forcing the sale of lots by first taking possession of them?" A thought struck him. "Look," he said breathlessly, "you haven't changed your mind about having Jor keep guard in front of the shop?"

The plump face in the telestat plate grew impatient. "Now, see here, Fara, let the constituted authorities handle this matter."

"But you're going to keep Jor there," Fara said doggedly.

The mayor looked annoyed. "I promised, didn't I? So he'll be there. And now, do you want to buy time on the telestat? It's fifteen credits for one minute. Mind you, as a friend, I think you're wasting your money. No one has ever caught up with a false statement."

Fara said grimly, "Put two on, one in the morning, one in the evening."

"All right. We'll deny it completely. Good night."

The telestat went blank; and Fara sat there. A new thought hardened his face. "That boy of ours, there's going to be a showdown. He either works in my shop or he gets no more allowance."

Creel said, "You've handled him wrong. He's twenty-three, and you treat him like a child. Remember, at twenty-three you were a married man."

“That was different,” said Fara. “I had a sense of responsibility. Do you know what he did tonight?”

He didn’t quite catch her answer. For a moment he thought she said: “No. In what way did you humiliate him first?”

Fara felt too impatient to verify the improbable words. He rushed on, “He refused in front of the whole village to give me help. He’s a bad one, all bad.”

“Yes,” said Creel in a bitter tone. “He’s all bad. I’m sure you don’t realize how bad. He’s as cold as steel, but without steel’s strength or integrity. He took a long time, but he hates even me now because I stood up for you for so long when I knew you were wrong.”

“What’s that?” said Fara, startled; then gruffly: “Come, come, my dear, we’re both upset. Let’s go to bed.”

He slept poorly.

Chapter III

There were days when the conviction that this was a personal fight between himself and the weapon shop lay heavily on Fara. Though it was out of his way, he made a point of walking past the weapon shop on his way to and from work, always pausing to speak to Constable Jor. On the fourth day, the policeman wasn't there.

Fara waited patiently at first, then angrily. He walked finally to his shop and called Jor's house. Jor wasn't home. He was, according to his wife, guarding the weapon store. Fara hesitated. His own shop was piled with work, and he had a guilty sense of having neglected his customers for the first time in his life. It would be simple to call up the mayor and report Jor's dereliction. And yet he didn't want to get the man into trouble.

Out in the street, he saw that a large crowd was gathering in front of the weapon shop. Fara hurried. A man he knew greeted him excitedly: "Jor's been murdered, Fara!"

"Murdered!" Fara stood very still, and at first he was not clearly conscious of the thought that was in his mind: Satisfaction! Now, even the soldiers would have to act. He realized the ghastly tenor of his mind. He said slowly, "Where's the body?"

"Inside."

"You mean those . . . scum, In spite of himself, he hesitated over the epithet. It was difficult to think of the silver-haired weapon shop man in such terms. His mind hardened. "You mean, those scum killed him, then pulled his body inside?"

"Nobody saw the killing," said another man, "but he's gone and hasn't been seen for three hours. The mayor got the weapon shop on telestat, but they claim they don't know anything about him. They've done away with him, that's what, and now they're pretending innocence. Well, they won't get out of it as easily as that. Mayor's gone to phone the soldiers at Ferd to bring up some big guns."

Something of the excitement that was in the crowd surged through Fara, the feeling that big things were brewing. It was the most delicious sensation that had ever tingled along his nerves, and it was all mixed with a strange pride that he had been so right about this, that he at least had never doubted that there was evil. He did not recognize the emotion as the full-flowering joy that comes to a member of a mob. But his voice shook as he said, "Guns? Yes, that will be the answer, and the soldiers will have to come, of course."

Fara nodded to himself in the immensity of his certainty that the Imperial soldiers would now have no excuse for not acting. He started to say something about what the empress would do if she found out that a man had lost his life because the soldiers had shirked their duty, but the words were drowned in a shout:

"Here comes the mayor! Hey, Mr. Mayor, when are the atomic cannons due?"

There was more of the same general meaning as the mayor's car landed lightly. Some of the questions must have reached his honor, for he stood up in the open two-seater, and held up his hand for silence. To Fara's astonishment, the plump-faced man gazed at him with accusing eyes. He looked around him, but he was almost alone; everybody else had crowded forward. Fara shook his head, puzzled by that

glare, and then flinched as Mayor Dale pointed a finger at him and said in a voice that trembled, "There's the man who's responsible for the trouble that has come upon us. Stand forward, Fara Clark, and show yourself. You've cost this town seven hundred credits that we could ill afford to spend."

Fara couldn't have moved or spoken to save his life. The mayor went on, with self-pity in his tone, "We've all known that it wasn't wise to interfere with these weapon shops. So long as the Imperial government leaves them alone, what right have we to set up guards or act against them? That's what I've thought from the beginning, but this man . . . this . . . this Fara Clark kept after all of us, forcing us to move against our wills, and so now we've got a seven-hundred credit bill to meet and..."

He broke off with, "I might as well make it brief. When I called the garrison, the commander laughed and said that Jor would turn up. And I had barely disconnected when there was a money call from Jor. He's on Mars." He waited for the shouts of amazement to die down. "It'll take four weeks for him to come back by ship, and we've got to pay for it, and Fara Clark is responsible."

The shock was over. Fara stood cold, his mind hard. He said finally, scathingly, "So you're giving up, and trying to blame me all in one breath. I say you are all fools."

As he turned away, he heard Mayor Dale saying that the situation was not completely lost as he had learned that the weapon shop had been set up in Glay because the village was equidistant from four cities, and that it was the city business the shop was after. This would mean tourists, and accessory trade for the village stores.

Fara heard no more. Head high, he walked back to his shop. There were one or two catcalls from the mob, but he ignored them. The worst of it, as the days passed, was the realization that the people of the weapon shop had no personal interest in him. They were remote, superior, undefeatable. When he thought of it, he felt a vague fear at the way they had transferred Jor to Mars in a period of less than three hours, when all the world knew that the trip by fastest spaceship could never be made in less than 24 days.

Fara did not go to the express station to see Jor arrive home. He had heard that the council had decided to charge Jor with half of the expense of the trip, on the threat of losing his job if he objected. On the second night after Jor's return, Fara slipped down to the constable's house, and handed the officer one hundred and seventy five credits. He returned home with a clear conscience.

It was on the third day after that the door of his shop banged open and a man came in. Fara frowned as he saw who it was: Castler, a village hanger-on. The man was grinning. "Thought you might be interested, Fara. Somebody came out of the weapon shop today."

Fara strained deliberately at the connecting bolt of a hard plate of the atomic motor he was fixing. He waited with a gathering annoyance that the man did not volunteer further information. Asking questions would be a form of recognition of the worthless fellow. A developing curiosity made him say finally, grudgingly, "I suppose the constable promptly picked him up?"

He supposed nothing of the kind, but it was an opening.

"It wasn't a man. It was a girl."

Fara knitted his brows. He didn't like the idea of making trouble for women. But the cunning devils! Using a girl, just as they had used an old man as a clerk. It was a trick that deserved to fail; the girl was probably a hussy who needed rough treatment. Fara said harshly, "Well, what's happened?"

"She's still out, bold as you please. Pretty thing, too."

The bolt off, Fara took the hard plate over to the polisher, and began patiently the long, careful task of smoothing away the crystals that heat had seared on the once shining metal. The soft throb of the polisher made the background to his next words, "Has anything been done?"

"Nope. The constable's been told, but he says he doesn't fancy being away from his family for another month or so, and paying the cost into the bargain."

Fara contemplated that for a minute, as the polisher throbbed on. His voice shook with suppressed fury when he said finally, "So they're letting them get away with it. It's all been as clever as hell. Can't they see that they mustn't give an inch before these . . . these transgressors? It's like giving countenance to sin."

From the corner of his eye, he noticed that there was a grin on the face of the other. It struck Fara suddenly that the man was enjoying his anger. And there was something else in that grin, a secret knowledge. Fara pulled the engine plate away from the polisher. He faced the ne'er-do-well. "Naturally, that sin part wouldn't worry you much."

"Oh," said the man nonchalantly, "the hard knocks of life make people tolerant. For instance, after you know the girl better, you yourself will probably come to realize that there's good in all of us."

It was not so much the words, as the I've-got-secret-information tone that made Fara snap, "What do you mean, after I get to know the girl better! I won't even speak to the brazen creature."

"One can't always choose," the other said with enormous casualness. "Suppose he brings her home."

"Suppose who brings who home?" Fara spoke irritably. "Castler, you?" He stopped. A dead weight of dismay plumped into his stomach; his whole being sagged. "You mean?" he said.

"I mean," replied Castler with a triumphant leer, "that the boys aren't letting a beauty like her be lonesome. And, naturally, your son was the first to speak to her." He finished: "They're walkin' together now on Second Avenue, cornin' this way."

"Get out of here!" Fara roared. "And stay away from me with your gloating. Get out!"

The man hadn't expected such an ignominious ending. He flushed scarlet, then went out, slamming the door. Fara stood for a moment, stiffly. Then, with jerky movements he shut off his power and went out into the street. The time to put a stop to that kind of thing was, now!

He had no clear plan, simply a determination to end an impossible situation. It was all mixed up with his anger against Cayle. How could he have been such a worthless son, he who paid his debts and worked hard, and tried to be decent and five up to the highest standards of the empress?

He wondered if there mightn't be bad blood on Creel's side, not from her mother, of course, Fara added the qualification hastily. There was a fine, hard-working woman, who would

leave Creel a tidy sum one of these days. But Creel's father had disappeared when she was a child.

And now, Cayle with this weapon shop girl, who had let herself be picked up, he saw them as he turned the corner onto Second Avenue. They were heading away from Fara. As he came up, the girl was saying:

"You have the wrong idea about us. A person like you can't get a job in our organization. You belong "in the Imperial service, where they can use young men of good appearance and ambition."

Fara was too intent for her words to mean anything. He said harshly, "Gayle!"

The couple turned, Gayle with the measured unhurriedness of a young man who had gone a long way on the road to acquiring steel-like nerves; the girl was quicker, but dignified.

Fara had a feeling that his anger was self-destroying, but the violence of his emotions ended that thought even as it came. He said thickly, "Gayle, get home at once."

He was aware of the girl looking at him curiously from strange, gray-green eyes. No shame, he thought, and his rage mounted, driving away the alarm that came at the sight of the flush that was creeping into Gayle's cheeks.

The flush faded into a pale, tight-lipped anger as Gayle half-turned to the girl and said, "This is the childish old fool I've got to contend with. Fortunately, we seldom see each other. We don't even eat our meals at the same table. What do you think of him?"

The girl smiled impersonally. "Oh, we know Fara Clark. He's the mainstay of the empress in Glay."

"Yes," the boy sneered. "You ought to hear him. He thinks we're living in heaven, and the empress is the divine power. The worst part of it is that there's no chance of his ever getting that stuffy look wiped off his face."

They walked off; and Fara stood there. The extent of what had happened drained anger from him as if it had never been. There was the realization that he had made a mistake. But he couldn't quite grasp it. For long now, since Cayle had refused to work in his shop, he had felt this building up to a climax. Suddenly, his own uncontrollable ferocity stood revealed as a partial product of that deeper problem. Only, now that the smash was here, he didn't want to face it.

All through the day in his shop, he kept pushing it out of his mind, kept thinking: Would this go on now, as before, Cayle and he living in the same house, not even looking at each other when they met, going to bed at different times, getting up, Fara at 6:30, Cayle at noon? Would that go on through all the days and years to come?

Creel was waiting for him when he arrived home. She said: "Fara, he wants you to loan him five hundred credits, so that he can go to Imperial City."

Fara nodded wordlessly. He brought the money back to the house the next morning, and gave it to Creel, who took it into Cayle's bedroom.

She came out a minute later. "He says to tell you goodbye."

When Fara came home that evening Cayle was gone. He wondered whether he ought to feel relieved. But the only

sensation that finally came was a conviction of disaster.

Chapter IV

He had been caught in a trap. Now he was escaping.

Cayle did not think of his departure from the village of Glay as the result of a decision. He had wanted to leave for so long that the purpose seemed part of his body hunger, like the need to eat or drink. But the impulse had grown dim and undefined. Baffled by his father, he had turned an unfriendly eye on everything that was of the village. And his obstinate defiance was matched at every turn by the obdurate qualities of his prison. until now.

Just why the cage had opened was obscure. There was the weapon shop girl, of course. Slender, her gray-green eyes intelligent, her face well-formed and carrying about her an indefinable aura of a person who had made many successful decisions, she had said, he remembered the words as if she were still speaking them. "Why, yes, I'm from Imperial City. I'm going back there Thursday afternoon."

This Thursday afternoon she was going to the great city, while he remained in Glay. He couldn't stand it. He felt ill, savage as an animal in his desire to go also. It was that, more than his quarrel with his father, which made him put pressure on his mother for money. Now, he sat on the local carplane to Ferd, dismayed to find that the girl was not aboard.

At the Ferd Air Center, waiting for the Imperial City plane, he stood at various vantage points and looked for Lucy Rail. But the crowds jamming toward the constant stream of interstate planes defeated even his alert eyes. All too soon his own vast machine glided in for a landing. That is, it

seemed too soon until he saw the plane coming toward him. A hundred feet high at the nose, absolutely transparent, it shimmered like a jewel as it drew up in the roadstead.

To Cayle there came a tremendous excitement. Thought of the girl faded. He clambered aboard feverishly. He did not think of Lucy again until the plane was hurtling along over the evergreen land far below. He leaned back in his comfortable chair then, and wondered: What kind of a person was she, this girl of the weapon shop? Where did she live? What was her life as a member of an almost rebel organization? . . . There was a man in a chair about ten feet along the aisle. Cayle suppressed an impulse to ask him all the questions that bubbled inside him. Other people might not realize as clearly as he himself did that, though he had lived all his life in Glay, he wasn't really village. He'd better not risk a rebuff.

A man laughed. A woman said, "But, darling, are you sure we can afford a tour of the planets?" They passed along the aisle, Cayle assessing the casualness with which they were taking the trip.

He felt enormously self-conscious at first, but he also gradually grew casual. He read the news on his chair 'stat. With idle glances he watched the scenery speeding by below, adjusting his chair scope for enlarged vision. He felt quite at home by the time the three men seated themselves opposite him and began to play cards.

It was a small game for tiny stakes. And, throughout two of the men were never addressed by name. The third one was called "Seal." Unusual name, it seemed to Cayle. And the man was as special as his name. He looked about thirty. He had eyes as yellow as a cat's. His hair was wavy, boyish in its unruliness. His face was sallow, though not unhealthy-

looking. Jeweled ornaments glittered from each lapel of his coat. Multiple rings flashed colored fire from his fingers. When he spoke it was with slow assurance. And it was he who finally turned to Cayle and said:

“ Noticed you watching us. Care to join us? ”

Cayle had been intent, automatically accepting Seal as a professional gambler, but not quite decided about the others. The question was, which one was the sucker?

“ Make the game more interesting, ” Seal suggested.

Cayle was suddenly pale. He realized now that these three were a team. And he was their selected victim. Instinctively, he glanced around to see how many people were observing his shame. To his relief, nobody at all was looking. The man who had been sitting ten feet away was not in sight. A stout, well-dressed woman paused at the entrance of the section but turned away. Slowly the color trickled back into his face. So they thought they had found someone who would be an easy mark, did they. He stood up, smiling.

“ Don’t mind if I do, ” he said.

He sat down in the vacant chair across from the yelloweyed man. The deal fell to Cayle. In quick succession and honestly, he dealt himself a king down and two kings up. He played the hand to the limit and, even with the low stakes, eventually raked in about four credits in coins.

He won three out of the next eight games, which was below average for him. He was a callidetic, with temporary emphasis on automatic skill at cards, though he had never heard the word. Once, five years before when he was seventeen, while playing with four other boys for credit twentieths, he won nineteen out of twenty games of

showdown. Thereafter, his gambling luck, which might have rescued him from the village, was so great that no one in Glay would play with him.

In spite of his winning streak now, he felt no sense of superiority. Seal dominated the game. There was a commanding air about him, an impression of abnormal strength, not physical. Cayle began to be fascinated.

"I hope you won't be offended," he said finally, "but you're a type of person who interests me."

The yellow eyes studied him thoughtfully, but Seal said nothing.

"Been around a lot, I suppose?" said Cayle.

He was dissatisfied with the question. It was not what he wanted. It sounded less than mature. Seal, mere gambler though he was, towered above such a naive approach. But he replied this time. "A bit," he said noncommittally.

His companion seemed to find that amusing. They both guffawed. Cayle flushed, but there was a will in him to know things. "To the planets?" he asked.

No answer. Seal carefully studied the cards that were down, then raised a credit-fortieth. Cayle struggled against the feeling that he was making a fool of himself. Then, "We all hear things," he said apologetically, "and it's sometimes hard to know what's true and what isn't. Are any of the planets worth going to?"

The yellow eyes studied him now with amusement. "Listen, fella," said Seal impressively, "don't go near them. Earth is the heaven of this system and if anybody tells you that wonderful Venus is beckoning, tell 'em to go to hell. that's

Venus. Hell, I mean. Endless sandstorms. And one day, when I was in Venusburg, the temperature rose to eight-four Centigrade." He finished. "They don't tell you things like that in the ads, do they?"

Cayle agreed hastily that they didn't. He was taken aback by the volubility of the reply. It sounded boastful like, he couldn't decide. But the man was abruptly less interesting. He had one more question.

"Are you married?" he asked.

Seal laughed. "Married! Listen, my friend, I get married every place I go. Not legally, mind you." He laughed again, significantly. "I see I'm giving you ideas."

Cayle said, "You don't have to get ideas like that from other people."

He spoke automatically. He hadn't expected such a revelation of character. No doubt Seal was a man of courage. But the glamour was gone from him. Cayle recognized that it was his village. morality, his mother's ethics, that were assessing the other. But he couldn't help it. For years he had had this conflict between his mother's credos and his instinctive awareness that the world outside could not be compressed into the mores that encompassed village life.

Seal was speaking again, heartily. "This boy is really going to be somebody in ever-glorious Isher, eh, boys? And I'm not over-stating either." He broke off. "Where do you get all those good cards?"

Cayle had won again. He raked in the pot, and hesitated. He had won forty-five credits, and knew he had better quit

before he caused irritation. "I'm afraid I'll have to stop," he said. "I've some things to do. It's been a pleas."

He faltered, breathless. A tiny, glittering gun peered at him over the edge of the table. The yellow-eyed man said in a monotone, "So you think it's time to quit, eh?" His head did not turn, but his voice reached out directly at his companions. "He thinks it's time to quit, boys. Shall we let him?" It must have been a rhetorical question, for the henchmen merely grimaced.

"Personally," the leader went on, "I'm all in favor of quitting. Now, let me see," he purred. "According to the transparency his wallet is in his upper right hand breast pocket and there are some fifty-credit notes in an envelope pinned into his shirt pocket. And then, of course, there's the money he won from us in his trouser pocket."

He leaned forward and his strange eyes were wide open and ironic. "So you thought we were gamblers who were going to take you, somehow. No, my friend, we don't work that way. Our system is much simpler. If you refused to hand over, or tried to attract somebody's attention, I'd fire this energy gun straight into your heart. It works on such a narrow beam that no one would even notice the tiny hole in your clothing. You'd continue to sit right there, looking a little sleepy perhaps, but who would wonder about that on this big ship, with all its busy, self-centered people?" His voice hardened. "Hand it over! Quick! I'm not fooling. I'll give you ten seconds."

It took longer than that to turn over the money but apparently the continuity of acquiescence was all that was required. He was allowed to put his empty pocket-book back into his pocket and several coins were ignored. "You'll need a bite before we land," Seal said generously.

The gun disappeared under the table and Seal leaned back in his chair with an easy relaxation. "Just in case," he said, "you decide to complain to the captain, let me tell you that we would kill you instantly without worrying about the consequences. Our story is simple. You've been foolish and lost all your money at cards." He laughed and climbed to his feet, once more imperturbable and mysterious. "Be seeing ya, fellow. Better luck next time."

The other men were climbing to their feet. The three sauntered off and, as Cayle watched, they disappeared into the forward cocktail bar. Cayle remained in his chair, hunched and devastated.

His gaze sought the distant clock, July 15, 4784 Isher, two hours and fifteen minutes out of Ferd and an hour still to Imperial City.

With closed eyes Cayle pictured himself arriving in the old city as darkness fell. His first night there, that was to have been so thrilling, would now be spent on the streets.

Chapter V

He couldn't sit still. And three times, as he paced through the ship, he paused before full length energy mirrors. His bloodshot eyes glared back at him from the lifelike image of himself. And over and above the desperate wonder of what to do now, he thought: How had they picked him for victim? What was there about him that had made the gang of three head unerringly toward him?

As he turned from the third mirror he saw the weapon shop girl. Her gaze flicked over him without recognition. She wore a soft blue tailored dress, and a strand of creamy pearls around her tanned neck. She looked so smart and at ease that he didn't have the heart to follow her. Hopelessly, Cayle moved out of her line of vision and sank into a seat.

A movement caught his distracted gaze. A man was slumping into a chair at the table across the aisle. He wore the uniform of a colonel in Her Imperial Majesty's Army. He was so drunk he could hardly sit, and how he had walked to the seat was a mystery rooted deep in the laws of balance. His head came around, and his eyes peered blearily at Cayle.

"Spying on me, eh?" His voice went down in pitch, and up in volume. "Waiter!"

A steward hurried forward. "Yes, sir?"

"The finest wine for my shadow n'me." As the waiter rushed off, the officer beckoned Cayle. "Might as well sit over here. Might as well travel together, eh?" His tone grew confidential. "I'm a wino, y'know. Been trying to keep it

from the empress for a long time. She doesn't like it." He shook his head sadly. "Doesn't like it at all. Well, what're you waiting for? C'mon over here."

Cayle came hastily, cursing the drunken fool. But hope came too. He had almost forgotten, but the weapon shop girl had suggested he join the Imperial forces. If he could obtain information from this alcoholic and join up fast, then the loss of the money wouldn't matter. "I've got to decide," he told himself. He distinctly thought of himself as making a decision.

He sipped his wine- presently, more tense than he cared to be, eyeing the older man with quick, surreptitious glances. The man's background emerged slowly out of a multitude of incoherent confidences. His name was Laurel Medlon. Colonel Laurel Medlon, he would have Cayle understand, confidant of the empress, intimate of the palace, head of a tax collecting district.

Damned, hie, good one, too," he said with a satisfaction that gave more weight to his words than the words themselves.

He looked sardonically at Cayle. "Like to get in on it, eh?" He hiccupped. "Okay, come to my office, tomorrow."

His voice trailed. He sat mumbling to himself. And, when Cayle asked a question, he muttered that he had come to Imperial City ". . . when I was your age. Boy, was I green!" He quivered in a spasm of vinous indignation. "Y'know, those damned clothes monopolies have different kinds of cloth they send out to the country. You can spot anybody from a village. I was sure spotted fast. . ."

His voice trailed off into a series of curses. His reminiscent rage communicated itself to Cayle.

So that was it, his clothes!

The unfairness of it wracked his body. His father had consistently refused to let him buy his suits even in near-by Ferd. Always Fara had protested, "How can I expect the local merchants to bring their repair work to me if my family doesn't deal with them?" And having

asked the unanswerable question, the older man would not listen to further appeals.

"And here I am," Cayle thought, "stripped because that old fool." The futile anger faded. Because large towns like Ferd probably had their own special brand of cloth, as easily identifiable as anything in Glay. The unfairness of it, he saw with reaching clarity, went far beyond the stubborn stupidity of one man.

But it was good to know, even at this eleventh hour.

The colonel was stirring. And, once more, Cayle pressed his question. "But how did you get into the Army? How did you become an officer in the first place?"

The drunken man said something about the empress having a damned nerve complaining about tax money. And then there was something about the attack on the weapon shops being a damned nuisance, but that wasn't clear. Another remark about some two-timing dames who had better watch out made Cayle visualize an officer who maintained several mistresses. And then, finally came the answer to his question.

"I paid five thousand credits for my commission, damn crime . . ." He gabbled again for a minute, then, "Empress insists on giving them out for nothing right now. Won't do it.

A man's got to have his graft." Indignantly, "I sure paid plenty."

"You mean," Cayle urged, "commissions are available now without money? Is that what you mean?" In his anxiety, he grabbed the man's sleeve.

The officer's eyes, which had been half closed, jerked open. They glared at Cayle suspiciously. "Who are you?" he snapped. "Get away from me." His voice was harsh, briefly almost sober. "By God," he said, "you can't travel these days without picking up some leech. I've a good mind to have you arrested."

Cayle stood up, flushing. He staggered as he walked away. He felt shaken and on the verge of panic. He was being hit too hard and too often.

The blur faded slowly from his mind. He saw that he had paused to peer into the forward cocktail bar. Seal and his companions were still there. The sight of them stiffened him and he knew why he had come back to look at them. There was a will to action growing in him, a determination not to let them get away with what they had done. But first he'd need some information.

He spun on his heel and headed straight for the weapon shop girl, who sat in one corner reading a book, a slim, handsome young woman of twenty years of so. Her eyes studied his face as he described how his money had been stolen. Cayle finished. "Here's what I want to know. Would you advise me to go to the captain?"

She shook her head. "No," she said, "I wouldn't do that. The captain and the crew receive a forty percent cut on most of these ships. They'd help dispose of your

Cayle leaned back in his seat. He felt drained of vitality. The trip, his first beyond Ferd, was taking toll of his strength. "How is it?" he asked finally, straightening, "that they didn't pick you? Oh, I know you probably aren't wearing village type clothes, but how do they select?"

The girl shook her head. "These men," she said, "go around surreptitiously using transparencies. The first thing they discover is, if you're wearing a weapon shop gun. Then they leave you strictly alone."

Cayle's face hardened*. "Could I borrow yours?" he asked tautly. "I'll show those skunks."

The girl shrugged. "Weapon shop guns are tuned to individuals," she said. "Mine .Wouldn't work for you. And, besides, you can use it only for defense. It's too late for you to defend yourself."

Cayle stared gloomily down through the myradel floor. The beauty below mocked him. The splendor of the towns that appeared every few minutes merely deepened his depression. Slowly the desperation came back. It seemed to him suddenly that Lucy Rail was his last hope and that he had to persuade her to help him. He said, "Isn't there anything that the weapon shops do besides sell guns?"

The girl hesitated. "We have an information center," she said finally.

"What do you mean, information? What kind of information?"

"Oh, everything. Where people were born. How much money they have. What crimes they've committed or are committing. Of course, we don't interfere."

Cayle frowned at her, simultaneously dissatisfied and fascinated. He had not intended to be distracted but for years there had been questions in his mind about the weapon shops.

And here was somebody who knew.

“But what do they do?” he said insistently. “If they’ve got such wonderful guns why don’t they just take over the government?”

Lucy Rail smiled and shook her head. “You don’t understand,” she said. “The weapon shops were founded more than two thousand years ago by a man who decided that the incessant struggle for power of different groups was insane and the civil and other wars must stop forever. It was a time when the world had just emerged from a war in which more than a billion people had died and he found thousands of people who agreed to follow him. His idea was nothing less than that whatever government was in power should not be overthrown. But that an organization should be set up which would have one principal purpose, to ensure that no government ever again obtained complete power over its people. A man who felt himself wronged should be able to go somewhere to buy a defensive gun. You cannot imagine what a great forward step that was. Under the old tyrannical governments it was frequently a capital offense to be found in possession of a blaster or a gun.”

Her voice was taking on emotional intensity now. It was clear that she believed what she was saying. She went on earnestly. “What gave the founder the idea was the invention of an electronic and atomic system of control which made it possible to build indestructible weapon shops and to manufacture weapons that could only be used for defense. That last ended all possibility of weapon shop guns

being used by gangsters and other criminals and morally justified the entire enterprise. For defensive purposes a weapon shop gun is superior to an ordinary or government weapon. It works on mind control and leaps to the hand when wanted. It provides a defensive screen against other blasters, though not against bullets but since it is so much faster, that isn't important."

She looked at Cayle and the intentness faded from her face. "Is that what you wanted to know?" she asked.

"Suppose you're shot from ambush?" Cayle asked.

She shrugged. "No defense." She shook her head, smiling faintly. "You really don't understand. We don't worry about individuals. What counts is that many millions of people have the knowledge that they can go to a weapon shop if they want to protect themselves and their families. And, even more important, the forces that would normally try to enslave them are restrained by the conviction that it is dangerous to press people too far. And so a great balance has been struck between those who govern and those who are governed."

Cayle stared at her in bitter disappointment. "You mean that a person has to save himself? Even when you get a gun you have to nerve yourself to resist? Nobody is there to help you?"

It struck him with a pang that she must have told him this in order to show him why she couldn't help him.

Lucy spoke again. "I can see that what I've told you is a great disappointment to you. But that's the way it is. And I think you'll realize that's the way it has to be. When a people lose the courage to resist encroachment on their rights, then they can't be saved by an outside force. Our

belief is that people always have the kind of government they want and that individuals must bear the risks of freedom, even to the extent of giving their lives."

There must have been an expression on his face, a reflection of the strain that was in him. For she broke off. "Look," she urged, "let me alone for a while to think over what you've told me. I won't promise anything. But I'll give you my decision before we reach our destination. All right?"

He thought it was a nice way of getting rid of him. He stood up, smiling wryly, and took an empty seat in an adjoining salon. Later, when he glanced in the doorway, the corner where she had been sitting was unoccupied.

It was that that decided him. She was evading the problem. He had been tensing again and now he climbed to his feet and headed for the forward bar.

He came upon Seal from behind and struck him a cruel blow on the side of the face. The smaller man was plummeted out of his stool and knocked to the floor. His two companions jumped to their feet. Cayle kicked the nearer man in the groin, mercilessly. The fellow moaned, and staggered, clutching his stomach.

Ignoring him, Cayle dived at the third man, who was trying to get his gun from a shoulder holster. He struck the gambler with the full weight of his body, and from that moment the advantage was his. It was he who secured the gun, struck savagely with it at the man's groping hand and drew blood and a cry of pain, followed by a mad scramble to break free.

Cayle whirled, in time to see Seal climb to his feet. The man rubbed his jaw and they stood staring at each other.

“Give me back my money,” said Cayle. “You picked the wrong man.”

Seal raised his voice. “Folks, I’m being robbed. This is the most barefaced.”

He stopped. He must have realized that this was not a matter of being clever or reasonable. He must have realized it for he suddenly held up his hands and said quickly, “Don’t shoot, you fool! After all, we didn’t shoot you.”

Cayle, finger on trigger, restrained himself. “My money?” he snapped.

There was an interruption. A loud voice said, “What’s going on here? Put up your hands, you with the gun.”

Cayle turned and backed toward the near wall. Three ship’s officers with portable blasters stood just inside the door, covering him. Not once during the argument that followed did Cayle lower his own gun.

He told his story succinctly and refused to surrender. “I have reason to believe,” he said, “that the officers of a ship on which such incidents can occur are not above suspicion. Now, quick, Seal, my money.”

There was no answer. He sent a swift look to where Seal had been, and felt a sense of emptiness.

The gambler was gone. There was no sign of the two henchmen.

“Look,” said the officer who seemed to be in command, “put up your gun and we’ll forget the whole matter.”

Cayle said, "I'll go out of that door." He motioned to his right. "When I'm through there I'll put up my gun."

That was agreeable and Cayle wasted no time. He searched the ship, then, from stem to stern, but found no sign of Seal or his companions. In a fury, he sought out the captain. "You scum, you," he said coldly, "you let them get away in an airboat."

The officer stared at him coolly. "Young man," he said finally, satirically, "you are discovering that the ads are right. Travel is very educational. As a result of being aboard our ship, you have become more alert. You have discovered within yourself qualities of courage hitherto unsuspected. Within the space of a few hours, in short, you've grown up a little. The value of that in terms of survival cannot be estimated. In terms of money, you've paid a small amount. If you should desire, at some future date to pay an additional gratuity, I shall be happy to give you my address.

"Cayle said, "I'll report you to your firm."

The officer shrugged. "Complaint forms are available in the lounge. You'll have to attend a hearing at our Ferd office at your own expense."

"I see," said Cayle grimly. "It works out very nicely for you, doesn't it?"

"I didn't make the rules," was the reply. "I just live under them."

Quivering, Cayle walked back to the salon where he had last seen the weapon shop girl. But she was still not in sight. He began to tense himself for the landing, now less than half an hour away. Below he could see that the shadows of approaching darkness were lengthening over the world of

Isher. The whole eastern sky looked dark and misty as if out there, beyond the far horizon, night had already come.

A few minutes after Cayle had walked away from her, the girl closed her book and strolled in a leisurely fashion into a private telestat booth. She locked the door, then pulled the switch that disconnected the instrument from the main board in the captain's cabin.

She took one of the rings from her fingers, manipulated it into a careful integration with the government 'stat. A woman's face took shape on the screen, said matter-of-factly, "Information Center."

"Connect me with Robert Hedrock."

"One moment, please."

The man's face that came almost immediately onto the screen was rugged rather than handsome but it looked sensitive as well as strong and there was a pride and vitality in every muscular quirk, in every movement, that was startling to see. The personality of the man poured forth from the image of him in a ceaseless, magnetic stream. His voice, when he spoke, was quiet though resonant:

"Coordination department."

"This is Lucy Rail, guardian of Imperial Potential, Cayle Clark." She went on to describe briefly what had happened to Cayle. "We measured him as a callidetic giant and are watching him in the hope that his rise will be so rapid that we can use him in our fight to prevent the empress from destroying the weapon shops with her new time weapon. This is in accord with the directive that no possibility be neglected provided there is someone available to do something about it. I think he should be given some money."

“I see.” The virile face was thoughtful. “What is his village index?”

“Middling. He may have a hard time in the city for a while. But he’ll get over his small town attitudes quickly. The trouble he is involved in now will toughen him. But he needs help.”

There was decision on Hedrock’s face. “In such cases as this the smaller the amount of money the greater the subsequent gratitude.” he smiled. “we hope. Give him fifteen credits and let him regard it as a personal loan from you. Provide no other protection of any kind. He’s on his own completely. Anything else?”

“Nothing.”

“Goodbye then.”

It required less than a minute for Lucy Rail to restore the ‘stat to its full government status.

Chapter VI

Cayle watched the face of the landlady as she looked him over. This decision was out of his hands.

He actually thought of it as that, a decision. The question was, would she spot him as village? He couldn't be sure. Her expression, when she nodded, was enigmatic. The room she rented him was small but it cost only a credit-fourth a day.

Cayle lay down on the bed and relaxed by the rhythm system. He felt amazingly well. The theft of his money still stung but it was no 'longer a disaster. The fifteen credits the weapon shop girl had given him would tide him over for a few weeks. He was safe. He was in Imperial City. And the very fact that the girl had loaned him money and given him her name and address must prove something. Cayle sighed with pleasure, finally, and went out to get some supper.

He had noticed an automat at the corner. It was deserted except for a middle-aged man. Cayle bought a steak from the instantaneous cooking machine, and then deliberately sat down near the other diner.

"I'm new here," he said conversationally. "Can you give me a picture of the city? I'd appreciate it."

It was a new tack, for him, admitting naivete. But he felt very sure of himself, and very convinced that he needed data more than he needed to protect his own self-conscious pride. He was not too surprised when the stranger cleared his throat importantly and then said:

"New to the big city, eh? Been anywhere yet?"

"No. Just arrived."

The man nodded, half to himself, a faint gleam of interest in his gray eyes. Cayle thought cynically: "He's wondering how he can take advantage of me.

The other spoke again, "his tone half-ingratiating now. "My name is Gregor. I live just around the corner in a skytel. What do you want to know?"

"Oh," Cayle spoke quickly, "where's the best residential district? Where's the business section? Who's being talked about?"

Gregor laughed. "That last, the empress, of course. Have you ever seen her?"

"Only on the 'stats."

"Well, you know then that she's just a kid trying hard to be tough."

Cayle knew nothing of the kind. Despite his cynicism, he had never thought of any member of the ruling family of Isher except in terms of their titles. Automatically, he rejected this man's attempt to make a human being out of Imperial Innelda.

He said, "What about the empress?"

"They've got her trapped in the palace, a bunch of old men who don't want to give up power."

Cayle frowned, dissatisfied with the picture. He recalled the last time he had seen the empress on the 'stats. It was a

willful face as he remembered it; and her voice had had in it great pride as well as determination. If any group was trying to use her as a tool, then they had better watch out. The young empress had a mind of her own.

Gregor said, "You'll want to try the games. That's on the Avenue of Luck. And then there's the theaters, and the restaurants, and."

Cayle was losing interest. He should have known better than to expect that a casual acquaintance in a cheap residential district would be able to tell him what he wanted to know. This man had a small mind. What he had to say would not be important.

The man was continuing: "I'll be very happy to take you around. I'm a little short myself right now but."

Cayle smiled wryly. So that was the extent of this man's machinations. It was part of the corrupt pattern of Isher life, but in this case such a mean and miserable part that it didn't matter. He shook his head and said gently:

"I'll be happy to go out some other time. Tonight, I'm kind of tired, you know, long trip, just got in."

He applied himself to his food, not at all unhappy. The conversation had done him no harm, in fact, he felt slightly better. Without ever having been in Imperial City, he had a better idea than Gregor as to what was, and what was not, sensible.

The meal cost more than he had expected. But even that he decided not to regret. After his experiences on the plane he needed sustenance. He went out onto the street contentedly. The neighborhood swarmed with children, and though it was already dark the play went on relentlessly.

Cayle paused for a moment to watch them. Their ages seemed to vary from about six to twelve years. Their play was of the group-rhythm type taught in all the schools, only this was heavily overlaid with a sex-motif that he had never seen before. He was startled, then rueful.

“Good heavens!” he thought. “I had the reputation for being a devil of a fellow. To these kids I’d be just plain naive.”

He went up to his room, conscious that the young man over whom the elders of Glay had many times shaken their heads was really a simple, honest soul. He might come to a bad end but it would be because he was too innocent, not the other way around.

It disturbed him. In Glay there had been a certain pleasure in defying the conventions. In Glay he had thought of himself as being “city.” Lying on the bed he knew that was true up to a point only. He lacked experience and knowledge, automatic response and awareness of dangers. His immediate plans must include remedies for these weaknesses. The vagueness of the purpose disturbed him. He had an uneasy feeling that he was making stop-gap decisions, that somehow he was not comprehending the main decision he must make one of these days.

He drifted into sleep, worrying about it. Twice, when he stirred on the edge of wakening, the thought was still there, unpleasant, urgent, a jarring background to his first night in the city of dreams. He awoke tired and unhappy. Only gradually did the uneasiness wear off.

He avoided the expensive automat, eating breakfast for a credit-eighth in a restaurant that offered personal service and featured “home” cooking. He regretted his miserliness.

The weight of the indigestible meal on his stomach did not lighten until he was in the Penny Palace, an ornate gambling establishment on the world famous Avenue of Luck.

According to a guidebook which dealt exclusively with the avenue and its games, the Penny Palace owners "have put up glitter signs which modestly claim that it is possible for anyone to come in with a penny and walk out with a million, meaning, of course, a million credits." Whether or not this good fortune has ever been achieved the signs do not indicate.

The write-up concluded generously, "The Penny Palace has the distinction of having more fifty-fifty games for the number of machines it has in operation than any other establishment on the Avenue of Luck."

It was that plus the low stakes that interested Cayle. His immediate plans did not include walking out "with a million." He wanted five hundred credits to begin with. After that, well, then he could afford to enlarge his horizon.

He laid his first bet on a machine that pumped the words odd and even into a swirling pool of light. When ten of each had been pumped into the pool the liquidlooking stuff suffered a chemical change, after which it would support only one of the words on its surface. All the others sank through a screen and vanished.

The winning words floated easily face up and somehow set in motion the paying mechanism or the collecting mechanism. The bettors either saw their bets vanish with a click or else their winnings would slide automatically to the square before which they stood. Cayle heard the click of defeat.

He doubled his bet and this time won. He withdrew his original stake, and played with the coin he had won. The intricate lights fused, the pump squished, then up floated the word even. The pleasant sound of money sliding softly toward him assailed Cayle's ears. It was a sound that he was to hear often during the next hour and a half for, despite the fact that he played cautiously and only with pennies, he won just over five credits.

Tired at last he retreated to a connecting restaurant. When he came back into the "treasure room," as it was called, he noticed a game that was played in an even more intimate fashion by the player himself.

The money went into a slot, releasing a lever, and when this was pulled a light sequence was set up. The movement was very rapid but it resolved swiftly into red or black. The game was thus but another variation of the odd and even sequence, since the player had the same fifty-fifty chance of winning.

Cayle slipped a half-credit coin into the proper slot, pulled the activating lever, and lost. His second guess was equally wrong, and his third, also. The fourth time his color shimmered into place and he had his first win. He won the next ten straight, lost four, then won seven out of another ten series. In two hours, by playing carefully, limiting his luck rather than forcing it, he won seventy-eight credits.

He withdrew to one of the bars for a drink, and pondered his next move. So many things to do, buy a new suit, protect his winnings, prepare for another night and pay back the money Lucy Rail had loaned him.

His mind poised, titillated. He felt comfortable and very sure of himself. A moment later he was putting through a

'stat call to the weapon shop girl.

Making more money could wait.

She came in almost immediately. "I'm out on the street now," she answered his request.

Cayle could see what she meant. Her face almost filled the screen. Extens-stats magnified from a tiny image. People used them on the street, keeping them connected with their home 'stats. One of the fellows in Glay had one.

Before Cayle could speak, the girl said: "I'm on my way to my apartment. Wouldn't you like to meet me there?"

Would he!

Her apartment turned out to be a -four room affair, unique only in the abundance of automatic devices. After a quick look around, it was clear to Cayle that Lucy Rail never did a stroke of housework. What puzzled him, however, was that the place seemed unprotected. The girl came out of her bedroom dressed for the street and shrugged at his comment.

"We weapon shop people," she said, "live just like anyone else, usually in the nicer residential districts. Only our shops and." she hesitated. "a few factories and, of course, the Information Center are protected from interference."

She broke off. "You said something about buying a suit. If you wish I'll help you select it. I've only two hours, though."

Cayle held the door open for her, exhilarated. The invitation to her apartment must have a personal meaning. Whatever her duties for the weapon shops, they couldn't possibly include inviting obscure Cayle Clark to her apartment, even

if only for a few moments. He decided to assume that she was interested in him as an individual.

They took a carplane, Lucy pushing the button that brought the machine down to pick them up.

“Where are we going?” Cayle asked.

The girl smiled, and shook her head. “You’ll see,” she said. When they were in the plane, she pointed up. “Look,” she said.

An artificial cloud was breaking out in the sky above. It changed colors several times, then vividly through it shone the letters: haberdashery paradise.

Cayle said, “Why I saw their ad last night.”

He had forgotten but now he remembered. The streamers of lights had soared aloft the night before as he walked from the automat to his rooming house. Advertising Paradise. Informing males of every age that here was the place to buy, here the retail establishment that could furnish anything in men’s clothing any hour of the day or night, anywhere on earth, Mars or Venus and, for a trifling extra cost, anywhere in the inhabited Solar System.

The ad had been one of hundreds, and so, in spite of his need for clothes, the name didn’t remain in his memory.

“It’s a store worth seeing,” Lucy said.

It seemed to Cayle that she was enjoying his enjoyment. It made him feel a little naive, but not too much.

What was important was that she was going with him. He ventured, “It’s so kind of you to help me.”

Haberdashery Paradise turned out to be more impressive than its ads. The building was three blocks long and eighty stories high. So Lucy told him; and added, "We'll go to the main sections quickly, then buy your suit."

The entrance to Paradise was a hundred yards wide, and thirty stories high. An energy screen kept the weather out but its doorless vastness was otherwise without barriers. It was easy to press through the harmless screen into the domed anteroom. The Paradise not only supplied beach clothing, it supplied a beach with a quarter of a mile of surging water tumbling from a misty horizon onto the rich, tangy smell of the sea itself. Paradise not only supplied ski outfits, it supplied startlingly lifelike mountains with a twisting half-mile of snow-covered slope.

"Paradise is a complete store," said one flashing sign to which Lucy called his attention. "If there is anything you do not see that fits in with our slogan, 'Everything for the Man,' ask for it. We have it at a price."

"That includes women," Lucy said matter-of-factly. "They charge the same for women as they do for their suits, anywhere from five credits to fifty thousand. You'd be surprised how many women of good family register when they need money. It's all very discreet, of course."

Cayle saw that she was looking at him thoughtfully. And that he was expected to make a comment. It was so direct that he was startled. He said hastily, "I shall never pay money for a woman."

It seemed to satisfy her, for they went from there to the suits. There were thirty floors of suits but each floor had its own price range. Lucy took him to the twenty-thirty credit floor and pointed out to him the difference in weave

between "city" cloth and the cloth of his own suit. For thirty-two credits he bought a suit, tie, socks and shoes.

"I don't think," said Lucy practically, "you should go any higher than that yet."

She refused his offer of the credits he owed her. "You can pay me that later on. I'd rather you put it in the bank now, as a reserve fund."

It meant he would see her again. It seemed to mean she wanted to see him again.

"Better hurry and change," said Lucy. "I'll wait."

It was that that decided him to try to kiss her before they separated. But when he came out, her first words dashed this determination. "I didn't realize how late it was," she said. "It's three o'clock."

She paused to look at him, smiled. "You're a big, strong, handsome man," she said. "Did you know? But now, let's hurry."

They separated at the Gargantuan entrance, Lucy hurrying to a carplane stop, leaving him empty behind her. The feeling departed slowly. He began to walk at a quickening pace.

By the time he came to where the Fifth Interplanetary Bank sat heavily on the base from which its ethereal spires soared to a height of sixty-four stories, ambition was surging in him again. It was a big bank in which to deposit the tiny sum of fifteen credits but the money was accepted without comment, though he was required to register his fingerprints.

Cayle left the bank, more relaxed than he had been at any time since the robbery. He had a savings account. He was suitably dressed. There remained one more thing before he proceeded to the third phase of his gambling career.

From one of the public carplanes he had located the all-directional sign of a weapon shop, nestling in its private park near the bank. He walked briskly up the be-flowered pathway, and he was almost at the door when he noticed the small sign, which he had never seen before in a weapon shop. The sign read:

ALL METROPOLITAN WEAPON SHOPS TEMPORARILY
CLOSED

NEW AND OLD RURIAL SHOPS OPEN AS USUAL

Cayle retreated reluctantly. It was one possibility he had not expected, the fabulous weapon shops being closed. He turned as a thought came. But there was no indication as to when the shops would reopen, no date, nothing at all but the one simple announcement. He stood frowning, experiencing a sense of loss, shocked by the silence. Not, he realized that that last should be bothering him. In Glay it was always silent around the weapon shop.

The feeling of personal loss, the what-ought-he-to-do-now bewilderment grew. On impulse, he tried the door. It was solid and immovable. His second retreat began, and this time he carried through to the street.

He stood on a safety isle undecided as to what button to push. He thought back over the two and a half hours with Lucy and it seemed a curious event in space-time. He felt appalled, remembering how drab his conversation had been. And y^ t, except for a certain directness, a greater

decisiveness, her own conversation left no dazzling memories.

“This is it,” he thought. “When a girl puts up with a dull fellow for an afternoon, she’s felt something.”

The pressures inside him grew stronger, the will to action telescoping his plans, impelling him to swift activity. He had thought, weapon shop, more gambling, then Army District Headquarters commanded by Colonel Medlon, over a period of a week. The weapon shop had to be first because weapon shops did not open for Imperial agents, whether soldiers or merely government employees.

But he couldn’t wait for that now. He pressed the button that would bring down the first carplane going toward District Number 19.

A minute later he was on his way.

Chapter VII

District 19 headquarters was an old style building of the waterfall design. The pattern was overdone, the design renewing itself at frequent intervals. Stream after marble stream poured forth from hidden crevices and gradually merged one with another.

It was not a big building, but it was big enough to give Cayle pause. Its fifteen stories and its general offices, filled with clucking file machines and clerks, were impressive. He hadn't pictured such a field of authority behind the drunken man on the plane.

The building directory listed civil functions and military functions. Cayle presumed that he would find Colonel Medlon somewhere behind the heading: staff offices,

PENTHOUSE.

A note in brackets under the listing said: Secure pass to penthouse elevator at reception desk on 15th floor.

The reception department took his name, but there was a subdued consultation before a man attached it to a relayer and submitted it for the examination of an inner office authority. A middle-aged man in captain's uniform emerged from a door. He scowled at Cayle. "The colonel," he said, "doesn't like young men." He added impatiently, "Who are you?"

It didn't sound promising. But Cayle felt his own stubbornness thickening in his throat. His long experience at defying his father made it possible for him to say in a

level voice, "I met Colonel Medlon on a plane to Imperial City yesterday and he insisted I come to see him. If you will please inform him that I am here."

The captain looked at him for a full half minute. Then, without a word, he went back into the inner sanctum. He emerged, shaking his head but more friendly. "The colonel says that he does not remember you but that he will give you a minute." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "Was he, uh, under the influence?"

Cayle nodded. He did not trust himself to speak. The captain said in a low, urgent voice, "Go inside and push him for all he's worth. A very important personage has called him twice today and he wasn't in. And now you've got him nervous. He's frightened of what he says when he's under. Doesn't dare touch a drop when he's in town, you know."

Cayle followed the backstabbing captain, with one more picture of the Isher world taking form in his mind. Here was a junior officer who appeared to be maneuvering for his superior's job.

He forgot that as he stepped out of the penthouse elevator. He wondered tensely if he were capable of handling this situation. The gloomy feeling came that he wasn't. He took one look at the man who sat behind a great desk in the corner of a large room and the fear that he would be thrown bodily out of the 19th District Headquarters evaporated.

It was the same man as on the ship, but somehow shrunken. His face, which had seemed bloated when he was drunk, looked smaller. His eyes were thoughtful, and he drummed nervously on his desk.

“You may leave us alone, Captain.” His voice was quiet and authoritative.

The captain departed with a set look on his face. Cayle sat down.

“I seem to recall your face now,” said Medlon. “Sorry, I guess I had been drinking a little.” He laughed hollowly.

Cayle was thinking that what the other had said about the empress must be highly dangerous for a man of his

position. Aloud, he said, “I did not receive the impression of anything unusual, sir.” He hesitated. “Though, when I think of it, you were perhaps too free with your confidences.” Once more he paused. “I thought it was your position that made it possible for you to speak so strongly and so freely.”

There was silence. Cayle had time for cautious self-congratulation but he did not delude himself. This man had not risen to his present position by being afraid or simpleminded.

“Uh.” said Colonel Medlon finally, “what did we, uh, agree on?”

“Among other things, sir,” said Cayle, “you told me that the government was in need of officers and you offered me a commission.”

“I do not,” said Colonel Medlon, “recall the offer.” He seemed to be bracing himself. “However, if I did so far forget myself as to make such an offer I have very regretfully to inform you that I have no authority to make you an officer. There is a regular procedure with regard to commissions, completely out of my hands. And since the positions are held in great esteem the government has long

regarded them as a source of financial return. For instance, a lieutenancy would cost you five thousand credits even with my influence behind you. A captaincy would disturb you to the extent of fifteen thousand credits, which is quite a sum for a young fellow to raise and

Cayle had been listening with a developing wryness. Looking back over his words it seemed to him that he had done his best with the material. He just wasn't in a position to make use of Medlon's indiscretions. He said with a twisted smile, "How much is a colonelcy?"

The officer guffawed. "Young fella," he said jovially, "it is not paid for in money. The price comes out of your soul, one black spot at a time."

He broke off, earnestly. "Now, look," he said. "I'm sorry if I was a little free with Her Majesty's commissions yesterday, but you understand how these things are. And just to show you I'm not a welsher, even when I'm not responsible, tell you what I'll do. You bring five thousand credits here at your convenience in, say, well, two weeks, and I'll practically guarantee you a commission. How's that?"

For a man who owned less than forty credits, it was a fairly futile attempt at a solution. If the empress had actually ordered that commissions not be sold in future, the command was being ignored by corrupt henchmen.

She and her advisers were not all-powerful. He had always thought that only the weapon shops restrained her government. But the net she was caught in was more intangible than that. The vast mass of individuals who served her will had their own schemes, their own desires, which they pursued with more ardor than they served the woman to whom they had sworn allegiance.

The colonel was rustling papers on his desk. The interview was over. Cayle was about to say some final word, when the telestat on the wall behind Medlon lighted up. The face of a young woman came onto the screen.

“Colonel,” she said curtly, “where the hell have you been?”

The officer stiffened. Then turned slowly. But Cayle did not need the uneasy reaction of the other man to realize who the woman was.

He was looking at the Empress of Isher.

Chapter VIII

Cayle, who had been sitting down, climbed to his feet. It was an automatic movement. Motivating it was an awareness that he was an intruder. He was halfway to the door when he saw that the woman's eyes were watching him.

"Colonel," he mumbled, "thank you for the privilege."

His voice was a sick sound in his ears and he stopped in shame. And then he felt a surge of doubt, a disbelief that such an event could be happening to him. He looked at the woman with eyes that momentarily questioned her identity. At that moment Medlon spoke.

"That will be all, Mr. Clark," he said, too loudly.

It was the loudness that brought Cayle out of his blur of emotional reaction. He was still ashamed of himself but it was a shame of something that had happened, not of what was happening. He had a sudden picture of himself, tall and well-dressed, and not too bad looking, standing here before a drink-wrecked caricature of a man, and before the woman of Isher. His gaze touched her face in the 'stat without flinching. He bowed slightly, an instinctive gesture that made him feel even better.

He had no doubt now of her identity. At twenty-five the Empress Innelda was not the world's most beautiful woman. But there was no mistaking her long, distinctive face and green eyes. It was the face of the Isher family of emperors and empresses. Her voice, when she spoke again, was her 'stat voice, familiar to anyone who had ever

listened to her anniversary greetings, so different, though, to have her speaking directly at him.

“What is your name, young man?”

It was Medlon who answered, quickly, his voice tense but calm. “An acquaintance of mine, Your Majesty.” He turned to Gayle. “Goodbye, Mr. Clark. I enjoyed our conversation.”

“I said, what is your name?” The woman ignored the interruption.

It was spoken so straight at him that Cayle shrank. But he gave his name.

“And why are you in Medlon’s office?”

Cayle caught Medlon’s eye. A tense eye, it was, striving to attract his attention. A remote part of his brain had admired Medlon’s skillful earlier words. His admiration faded. The man was in a panic. Deep inside Cayle a hope started. He said, “I was inquiring about the possibility of obtaining a commission in Your Majesty’s armed forces.”

“I thought so,” said the empress in a level voice. She paused. She looked thoughtfully from Cayle to Medlon, then back to Cayle. Her skin was a smooth, light tan in color. Her head was proudly held. She looked young and alive and gloriously confident. And something of her experience in handling men showed then. Instead of asking Cayle the next question, she gave Medlon a way out.

“And may I ask, Colonel, what your answer was?”

The officer was rigid, perspiring. But in spite of that his voice was calm and there was even an edge of joviality in it as he said, “I informed him, Your Majesty, that his

commission would require about two weeks to put through." He laughed depreciatingly. "As you know, there is a certain amount of red tape."

Cayle felt himself riding a tide that was lifting him higher and higher. Because the benefits of this were for him. He felt an unnatural admiration for the empress, she was so different from what he had expected. It amazed him that she would restrain herself so as not to embarrass one of her officers virtually caught in a misdemeanor.

The restraint did not keep the sarcasm out of her voice, however, as she said, "Yes, Colonel, I know but too well.

This whole rigmarole is only too familiar to me." Passion replaced the sarcasm. "Somehow or other, the young men who normally buy their way into the army have heard that something is up and so they remain away in droves. I am beginning to suspect there is a pro-weapon shop conspiracy to put off the few likely prospects who do turn up.

Her eyes-flashed with green fires. It was apparent that she was angry and that the restraints were off. She turned to Cayle.

"Cayle Clark," she said in a ringing voice, "how much were you asked to pay for your commission?"

Cayle hesitated. Medlon's eye was a terrible thing to see, it was so dark. His half-turned head seemed unnatural in the way it was twisted. The message in that abnormal eye needed no words. The colonel was regretting everything he had said to the prospective lieutenant of Her Majesty's Imperial Army.

The appeal was so great that Cayle felt repelled. He had never before experienced the sensation of having a man

completely at his mercy. It made him cringe. Abruptly, he didn't want to look. He said, "Your Majesty, I met Colonel Medlon on the Inter-State yesterday and he offered me a commission without any strings attached."

He felt better for the words. He saw that the officer was relaxing and that the woman was smiling with pleasure.

"Well, Colonel," she said, "I'm glad to hear that. And, since it answers in a satisfactory fashion what I was going to talk to you about, you have my felicitations. That is all."

The screen clicked into blackness. Colonel Medlon sank slowly back into his chair. Cayle walked forward, smiling. The colonel said in a level voice, "It has been a pleasure to meet you, young man. But now, I am very busy. I certainly hope I shall be hearing from you in the next two weeks with the five thousand. Goodbye."

Cayle did not move immediately, but the bitterness of the defeat was already upon him. Out of the darkness of his thoughts, came the consciousness that to him had come an improbable opportunity. And he had nullified it by being weak. He had believed that an amoral wretch would be grateful for being saved from exposure. He saw that the colonel, looking quite jaunty, was eyeing him with amusement.

"The empress doesn't understand the problem involved in ending a system of paid commissions." Medlon shrugged. "I have nothing to do with it myself. I can no more alter it than I can cut my throat. One man would destroy himself bucking it." He hesitated. A sneer came into his face. "My friend," he said, "I hope this has been a lesson to you in the economics of personal advancement." He finished curtly. "Well, good day."

Cayle decided against attacking the man physically. This was a military building, and he had no intention of being arrested for assault where he could not properly defend himself. In his mind he marked the colonel down for further attention at a later date.

Darkness was settling over the city of the Ishers when he finally emerged from District 19 Headquarters. He looked up at the cold fixed stars through a mist of ads, and felt much more at home than he had the night before. He was beginning to see his way through the maze of existence on this world. And it seemed to him that he had come through very well, considering his ignorance. All around him, the sidewalks began to give off the sunlight they had absorbed during the day. The night waxed brighter as the heavens above grew darker. He became more confident as he walked. He had been right to attack Seal regardless of risks, and he had been right to hold back on Medlon. Seal was an individual out in the open as he was, and basically no one cared what happened to him. But the colonel could call on the power of isher law.

He had not intended to return to the Avenue of Luck until morning. But now having, it seemed to him, resolved his inner doubts, he changed his mind. If he could win five thousand credits and buy a commission, the treasures of Isher would start pouring in his direction. And Lucy Rail, he mustn't forget Lucy.

Even one day was too long to wait.

Chapter IX

Cayle had to push his way through throngs of Human beings in order to enter the Penny Palace. The size of the crowds encouraged him. In this mass of money-hungry humanity he would be like a piece of driftwood in a vast ocean.

He did not hesitate. He had looked over the games earlier and he headed straight toward the one he wanted for his final bid for fortune. It would be important, he thought, to gain a playing position and stick to it.

The new game paid odds as high as a hundred to one and as low as five to one. It worked in a comparatively simple fashion, though Cayle, who knew something of the energies, having worked in his father's shop since before he was fifteen, realized there was electronic intricacy behind the deceptive appearance of alertness. A ball of force was the core. It was about an inch in diameter and it rolled erratically inside a larger plastic ball. Faster, faster, faster it darted over the inner surface, until its speed transcended the resistance of matter. Then, like the pure force it was, it burst the limitations of its prison. Through the plastic it plunged, as if there were nothing there, as if it were a beam of light that had been imprisoned by an unnatural physical law in an almost invisible cage.

And yet, the moment it was free, it grew afraid. It changed color, subtly, swiftly, and it slowed. Its speed of escape must have been miles a second but so great was its fear that it stopped completely after traveling less than three feet.

It began to fall. And until the moment of fall, until it almost touched the table, it gave an illusion of being everywhere. It was an illusion entirely inside the minds of the players, a product of enormous velocity and mental hallucination. Each player had the conviction that the ball was flying straight toward him, that when it fell it would fall into the channel he had activated with a number. It was inevitable that the majority of the gamblers were due for disappointment when the ball, its mission accomplished, dropped into a channel and activated the odds mechanism.

The very first game in which Cayle participated paid him thirty-seven credits for his one. He raked in his winnings with an attempt at casualness but the shock of victory overflowed along his nerves in spasms of excitement. He placed a credit card in four channels, lost, then bet the same numbers again and won ninety credits. During the next hour he won on an average once in five times. He recognized that his luck was phenomenal even for him and long before the hour was up he was risking ten credits in each channel that he played.

At no time did he have an opportunity to count his money. At intervals, he would thrust a handful of credits into the automatic changer and receive large bills, which he would press into an inner pocket. Not once did he draw on his reserves. After awhile, he thought in a curious panic, "I must have three or four thousand credits. It's time to quit. It's not necessary to win the whole five thousand in one night. I can come back tomorrow and the day after and day after that."

It was the speed of the game that confused him. Each time the impulse came, that it was time to think of stopping his play, the ball would start to whirl and he would hastily drop money into several channels. If he lost, irritation would

come, and a greedy determination not to leave behind even a penny of his winnings.

If he won, it seemed ridiculous to stop in the middle of the most amazing streak of luck that he could ever hope to have. Wait, he told himself, till he lost ten in a row . . . ten in a row . . . ten . . . Somewhere along there he had a glimpse of a wad of forty or fifty one-thousand credit notes which he had put in his side pocket. There was more money in other pockets and again and again, without being more than blurrily aware of the fact, he would strew large bills at random in various channels. How much he couldn't remember. Nor did it matter. The machine always counted accurately and paid him the right odds.

He was swaying now like a drunken man. His body seemed to be floating above the floor. He played on in an emotional mist almost oblivious of others. He did become conscious that more and more players were riding his luck, calling up his numbers in their own channels. But that was unimportant and personally meaningless. He did not come out of his daze until the ball plunked down like a dead thing in its cage. He stood stolid, waiting for the game to begin again, unaware that he had anything to do with its stopping until a plump, dark man came forward.

The stranger said with an oily smile, "Congratulations, young man, we welcome your patronage. We are happy for you but for these other ladies and gentlemen we have bad news. The rules of this house, which are conspicuously posted in our fine establishment, do not permit luck riders, as we call them. This fortunate young man's trend of luck has been definitely established. Henceforth, all other bets must be placed before the 'winner' makes his choice. The machine has been set to react accordingly. So do not cause yourself disappointment by making a last-second wager. It

will not work. And now, good luck to all of you and especially to you, young man."

He waddled off, still smiling. A moment later, the ball was whirling again.

It was during the third game that Cayle thought out of nothingness: "Why, I'm the center of attention." It startled him. He had come out of that oblivion on which he had counted to maintain his security. "I'd better slip out of here as quietly as possible," he thought.

He turned from the table and a pretty girl threw her arms around him, pressed tightly against him and kissed him.

"Oh, please, let me have some of your luck. Please, please."

He disentangled himself blankly, the original impulse forgotten. "I was going to do something," he remembered and laid several bets while he frowned over the elusive memory. He was aware that newcomers were jostling up to the table, sometimes forcibly crowding out the less resourceful and determined of those who had been there first. Once, when he noticed a particularly violent ejection of a vociferously protesting player, the warning thought ticked again in his head that he and this table were now plainly marked by a thousand avid eyes.

He couldn't recall just what it was he wanted to do about that. There seemed to be a lot of women around, plucking at him with their fingers, kissing him if he turned his head, and he had a sense of an over-abundance of their perfume.

He couldn't move his hands without a woman's bare skin being available for his touch, naked arms, naked backs, and dresses cut so low in front that he was constantly having his head drawn down into soft, daintily perfumed bosoms.

When he bent an inch for a natural reason the ever-present hands pulled him the rest of the way.

And still the night and his luck did not end. He had a sense of too much pleasure, too much applause at every spin, at every win. And whether he won or not women flung themselves into embraces with him and either kissed him commiseratingly or in a frenzy of delight. Wild music played in the background. He was twenty-three years old and the attack on every sense of his body overwhelmed his caution. When he had won uncountable thousands of credits the doors of the Penny Palace closed and the roly-poly man came over and spoke curtly.

“All right,” he said, “that’s enough. The place is cleared of strangers and we can stop this nonsense.”

Cayle stared at him, and the clock of danger was ticking so loudly that his whole brain hummed with the sound. “I think,” he mumbled, “I’ll go home.”

Somebody slapped his face, hard. “Again,” said the plump man. “He’s still riding, an emotional jag.” The second blow was harder. Cayle came out of his haze with a sharp comprehension that he was in deadly peril.

“What’s going on here?” he stammered. His eyes appealed to the people who had been cheering him only minutes before. The people whose presence had lulled him ... It was impossible that anything would be done against him while they were around.

He whirled on the plump man. And then stood rigid as rough hands grabbed him and rougher hands probed in the pockets of his clothes relieving him of his winnings. As from a great distance he heard the plump man speak again.

“Don’t be naive. There is nothing unusual about what has happened. All the regular players have been squeezed out. Not only out of the game, but out of the building. The thousand people in here now are hired for such occasions and cost us ten credits each. That’s only ten thousand altogether, and you won from fifty to a hundred times as much as that.” He shrugged. “People don’t realize the economics of such things. Next time, don’t be so greedy.” He smiled an oily smile. “That is, if there is a next time.”

Cayle found his voice. “What are you going to do?”

“You’ll see.” His voice went up. “All right, men, take him to the truckplane and we’ll open up again.”

Cayle felt himself irresistibly hustled across the room and into a dark corridor. He was thinking in despair that, once again, he had put himself into a position where other men decided his fate.

INTERLUDE

McAllister, reporter from 1951, realized that he was lying on a sidewalk. He climbed to his feet. A group of curious faces gawked at him; and there was no park, no magical city of the future. Instead a bleak row of one-story shops made a dull pattern on either side of the street. A man’s voice floated toward him out of a blur of other sounds: “I’m sure it’s the reporter who went into that weapon shop.”

So he was back in his own time. Perhaps even the same day. As he moved slowly away, the same penetrating voice said, “He looks kind of sick. I wonder what.”

He heard no more. But he thought, “Sick!” These people would never understand how sick. But somewhere on earth

must be a scientist who could help him. The record was that he hadn't exploded.

He was walking rapidly now, and clear of the crowd. Once, he looked back, and saw that the people were dispersing in the aimless fashion of folk who had lost their center of interest. McAllister turned a corner, and forgot them.

"I've got to decide."

The words were loud, close. It took a moment to realize that he had spoken them.

Decide? He hadn't thought of his position as requiring a decision. Here he was. Find a scientist ... If that was a decision, he had already made it. The question was, who? Memory came of his old physics professor at City College. Automatically, he turned into a phone booth and fumbled for a nickel. With a sickening sense of disaster, he remembered that he was dressed in an all-enclosing, transparent suit, and that his money was inside. He drew back, then stopped, shaken. What was happening?

It was night, in a brilliant, glowing city. He was standing on the boulevard of an avenue that stretched jewel-like into remote distance. It was a street that flamed with a soft light gleaming up from its surface, a road of light, like a river flowing under a sun that shone nowhere else, straight and smooth.

He walked along for uncomprehending minutes, fighting a wild hope, but at last the thought forced through to his consciousness: Was this again the age of Isher and the gunmakers? It could be. It looked right, and it meant they had brought him back. After all, they were not evil, and they would save him if they could. For all he knew, weeks had passed in their time.

He began to hurry. Find a weapon shop. A man walked by him, and McAllister turned and called after him. The man paused curiously, and looked back, then continued on his way. McAllister had a brief picture of dark, intense eyes, and a visualization of a person on his way to a marvelous home of the future. It was that that made him suppress his impulse to run after the man.

Afterwards, he realized he should have. It was the last person he saw on all those quiet, deserted streets. It must have been the in-between hour before the false dawn, and no one was aboard. Oddly, it was not the absence of human life that disturbed him. It was the fact that not once did he see a weapon shop.

In spite of that, his hope mounted. Soon it would be morning. Men would come out of these strange, glowing homes. Great scientists of an age of wizard scientists would examine him, not in a frenzy of haste, with the fear of destruction hanging over their heads. But quietly, in the sanity of super-laboratories.

The thought ended. He felt the change.

He was in the center of a blinding snow storm. He staggered from the first mighty, unexpected blow of that untamed wind. Then, bracing himself, he fought for mental and physical calm.

The shining wondrous night city was gone. Gone also the glowing road. Both vanished, transformed into this deadly, wilderness world. He peered through the driving snow. It was daylight, and he could make out the dim shadows of trees that reared up through the white mist of blizzard less than fifty feet away. Instinctively, he pressed toward their shelter and stood finally, out of that blowing, pressing wind.

He thought: "One minute in the distant future; the next, where?"

There was certainly no city. Only trees, and uninhabited forest and a bitter, primeval winter. How long he stood there, while those winds blew and that storm raged, he had no idea. He had time for a thousand thoughts, time to realize that the suit protected him from the cold as there was no cold; and then.

The blizzard was gone. And the trees. He stood on a sandy beach. Before him stretched a blue, sunlit sea that rippled over broken, white buildings. All around, scattered far into that shallow, lovely sea, far up into the weed-grown hills, were the remnants of a once tremendous city. Over all clung an aura of incredible age, and the silence of the long-dead was broken only by the gentle, timeless lapping of the waves.

Again came the instantaneous transition. More prepared this time, he nevertheless sank twice under the surface of the vast, swift river that carried him on and on. It was hard swimming, but the insulated suit was buoyant with the air it manufactured each passing second. And, after a moment, he began to struggle purposely toward the tree-lined shore a hundred feet to his right. A thought came, and he stopped swimming. "What's the use!" The truth was as simple as it was terrible. He was being shunted from the past to the future. He was the "weight" on the long end of an energy seesaw; and in some way he was slipping further ahead and further back each time. Only that could explain the catastrophic changes he had already witnessed. In an hour would come another change.

It came. He was lying face downward on green grass. When he looked up, he saw a half-dozen low-built buildings on the

horizon of grass. They looked alien, unhuman.

But his curiosity was not about them. A thought had come: How long actually, did he remain in one particular time?

He kept an eye on his watch; and the time was two hours and forty minutes. This was his last curiosity. Period after period, as the seesaw jerked on, he remained in his one position, water or land, it made no difference to him. He did not fight it. He neither walked nor ran nor swam nor even sat up . . . Past, future, past, future. His mind was turned inward. He had a vague feeling that there was something he ought to do, inside his skin, not outside. Something about a decision he had believed he must make. Funny, he couldn't recall what it was.

Beyond doubt, the gunmakers had won their respite. For at the far end of this dizzy teeter-totter was the machine -that had been used by the Isher soldiers as an activating force. It too teetered past, then future, in this mad seesaw.

But that decision. He'd really have to try to think about it...

Chapter X

At ten minutes of midnight, July 16, 4748, Isher, the door of the coordination department of the weapon makers, in the Hotel Royal Ganeel, opened. Robert Hed-rock came out and strode along a wide bright corridor that stretched off into the distance ahead of him. He moved with an almost catlike alertness but actually his attention was not on his surroundings.

Little more than a year ago he had applied for weapon shop membership, his given reason being that he expected a crisis between government and weapon shop forces and that he desired to be on the weapon shop side. His papers were in order, the Pp machine gave him so high a rating in every mental, physical and moral category that his file was immediately brought to the attention of the weapon shop executive council. From the beginning he was on special duty and his assignment to the coordination department during an emergency was merely a normal step in his meteoric rise to weapon shop power.

Hedrock was aware that a few members of the council and a number of the top executives considered his ascent too rapid and not in the best interests of the weapon shops. That he was even regarded by some as a mysterious figure, though no sinister connotations were intended by the critics. No one actually questioned the verdict of the Pp machine in his favor, which puzzled him at times. At some later date, he decided, he would investigate the machine much more carefully and discover just why normally skeptical men accepted its judgments without question.

It had proved inordinately simple for him to fool it, lie to it, tell it his carefully doctored story.

True, he had special control of his mind and abnormal technical knowledge of machine reaction to biological processes. There was also the overruling fact of his friendliness to the weapon shops, which undoubtedly helped. The Pp machine, he had been told, had the weapon shop door's unique sensitivity for recognizing hidden hostility. And its basic structure included the ability, also built into every gun, to recognize and react within limitations. Like the weapons that would not kill except in self-defense, or under other restrictions, its intricately acute electronic senses perceived minute differences in the reactions of every part, of the examined body. It was an invention that had been developed since the last time he had been a member of the weapon shops a hundred-odd years before. It was new to him. And their dependence on it made it necessary for Robert Hedrock, Earth's one immortal man, friend of the weapon shops, to make sure it was as effective a safeguard as they thought.

But that was for later. It was the least of the problems confronting him. He was a man who had to make up his mind, how soon was not yet clear, but all too soon it seemed to him. The first great attack of the youthful empress had already closed the weapon shops in every large city on earth. But even that was secondary compared to the problem of the endless seesaw. He could not escape the conviction that only he, of all the human beings on earth, was qualified to make the decision about that. And he still had not an idea of what to do.

His thought reached that point, as he came to the door marked Private, Executives Only, his destination. He

knocked; waited the necessary seconds, then entered without further preliminary.

It was a curiously arranged room in which he found himself. Not a large room, by Isher standards, but large enough. It was so close to being a 200-foot cube that Hed-rock's eyes could not detect the difference. Its most curious feature was that the door, through which he entered, was about a hundred feet above the floor with the ceiling an equal distance higher. There was a platform just inside the door. From it projected an energy plane. Hedrock stepped into one of the pairs of insulators on the platform. The moment he felt them grip his shoes he walked out onto the vaguely glowing latticework of force.

In the center of the room (center on height-depth as well as length-width level) seven weapon shop councilors were standing around a machine that floated in a transparent plastic case. They greeted Hedrock briefly, then returned their attention to the machine. Hedrock watched them silently, conscious of their intense, unnormal depression. Beside him Peter Cadron whispered, "It's almost time for another swing."

Hedrock nodded. And slowly, as he gazed at the wizard mechanism floating in its vacuumized case, their absorption communicated itself to him. It was a map of time. A map of inter-crossed lines so finely drawn that they seemed to waver like heat waves on a torrid day.

Theoretically the lines extended from a central point into the infinite past and the infinite future (with the limitation that in the mathematics employed, infinity was almost zero). But after several trillion years the limitation operated to create a blurred effect, which was enhanced by the unwillingness of the eyes to accept the image. On that

immense ocean of time, the shadowy shapes, one large and very near the center, one a mere speck on the curving vastness of the map, lay moveless. Hedrock knew that the speck was a magnified version of the reality, which was too small to make out with the naked eye. The image had been so organized that its every movement was followed by a series of magnifiers. These instruments were attuned to separate sensitive energies and adjusted automatically to the presence of additional onlookers.

As Hedrock watched with pitying eyes both shadows moved. It was a movement that had no parallel in macro-cosmic space, a movement so alien that the vision could not make an acceptable image. It was not a particularly swift process but, in spite of that, both shadows, withdrew? Where? Even the weapon shops scientists had never quite decided that. They withdrew and then slowly reappeared, but now their positions were reversed, with variations.

They were farther out. The large shadow, which had been wavering one month and three days from the center in the past, was suddenly a month and three days and a few hours in the future. The tiny speck, which had been 97 billion years in the future, reversed to about 106 billion years in the past.

The time distance was so colossal that Hedrock shrank in spite of himself and half turned to Cadron. "Have they figured out his energy potential?"

Cadron nodded wearily. "Enough to destroy the planet." He groaned. "Where in the name of space are we going to release it?"

Hedrock tried to picture that. He had not been among those who talked to McAllister, the reporter from the twentieth

century. His understanding of what had happened had been pieced together from fragmentary accounts. And one of his purposes in coming to this room now was to learn the details.

He drew Cadron aside and frankly asked for information. Cadron gazed at him with a wry smile. "All right," he said, "I'll tell you. The truth is, all of us are ashamed of the way we acted."

Hedrock said, "Then you feel that McAllister should not have been sacrificed?"

Cadron shook his head. "No, that isn't exactly what I mean." His frown deepened. "I guess the best method is to tell you the whole story, briefly, of course."

He began. "The girl attendant of the Greenway shop heard someone come and went out to attend to him. The customer was a queer looking chap in outlandish clothes. It turned out that he was a newspaper reporter from the twentieth century A.D. He was so obviously disconcerted, so fascinated by the showcase with their energy guns. And he gave an account of a weapon shop having appeared in a street in a little city in which he lived. I can imagine the sensation it caused but the truth is that everybody thought it was an illusion of some kind.

"It seemed solid, of course. But when the police tried to open the door, naturally it wouldn't open. McAllister, with a reporter's curiosity, finally tried the door himself. For him, of course, he not being a police or government official, it opened immediately. He went inside.

"He admitted to the attendant experiencing a sense of tension as he crossed the threshold and, although he didn't know it, it was at that moment that he picked up the first

measure of time-energy, the equivalent of approximately seven thousand years, his weight being the other factor. When the attendant told her father, who was in charge of the shop, what had occurred, he realized immediately that something was wrong. In a few minutes he had verified that the shop was being subjected to titanic energy pressure. He discovered that the source of the energy was the huge government building on an adjacent street. He immediately called the weapon makers into council.

"By the time we arrived on the scene a swift decision was necessary. McAllister had enough time energy locked up in his body to destroy the entire city, that is if he ever stepped outside our insulated shop without himself being insulated. Meanwhile, the pressure from the government building against our shop continued unabated. At any moment it might succeed in precipitating the shop itself into the time stream, and there was reason to believe that other attacks would be made at any moment on our shops everywhere. No one could guess what the result would be. To cut a long story short, we saw a way to gain time by focusing the energy of the building upon McAllister and tossing him back into his own time. We could do this by putting him into an insulated space suit which would prevent him from exploding until we could develop a mechanism for that purpose.

"We knew that he would seesaw back and forth in time, shifting the government building and its energies out of this space-time area."

Cadron shook his head gloomily. "I still don't see what else we could have done. We were compelled to act swiftly in a field where no great knowledge is available, and the fact that we merely got out of the frying pan and into the fire

was just our hard luck. But personally I feel very badly about the whole thing."

"Do you think McAllister is still alive?" Hedrock asked.

"Oh yes. The suit into which we put him was one of our supers, complete with an eight ring food-making device, and there's a cup in it that's always full of water. The other facilities are equally automatic."

He smiled a twisted smile. "We had an idea, completely false as it turned out, that we could save him at some later date."

"I see," said Hedrock. He felt depressed. It was unfortunate but all the decisions had been made before he had even heard of the danger.

The newsman was now the juggernaut of juggernauts. In all the universe there had never been anything like the power that was accumulating, swing by swing, in his body.

Released, the explosion would rock the fabric of space. All time would sigh to its echoes and the energy tensions that created the illusion of matter might collapse before the strain.

"What's the latest about the building?" Hedrock asked.

Cadron was more cheerful. "It's still within its critical limits. We've got to make our decision before it reaches the danger stage."

Hedrock was silent. The matter of what the decision should be was a sore point with him, who was obviously not going to be asked. He said finally. "What about the men who are working on the problem of slowing the swings and bringing the seesaw back this way?"

Another man answered that. “The research is abandoned. Science four thousand seven hundred and eighty-four has no answer. We’re lucky enough to have made one of our shops the fulcrum. We can set off the explosion anywhere in the past or future. But which? And when? Particularly when?”

The shadows on that cartograph made no movement, gave no sign. Their time of action was not yet.

Chapter XI

The strain attendant on watching another swing faded. The men were turning away from the map, and there was a murmur of conversation. Somebody said something about using the opportunity to acquire all the possible data on time travel. Councilor Kendlon remarked that the body's accumulation of energy was fairly convincing proof that time travel would never be popular.

It was Dresley, the precise, the orderly, who finally remarked, "Gentlemen, we are here as delegates of the Council to listen to Mr. Hedrock's report of the counterattack against the empress. In his report some weeks ago he was able to give us administrative details. And you will recall that we found his organization set-up to be efficient in the extreme. Mr. Hedrock, will you now bring us up to date?"

Hedrock glanced from person to person thoughtfully. He saw that they were watching him, and that raised his necessity level. His problem, it seemed to him, was to make up his own mind about the seesaw, then carry out his decision without regard for the attitude of his nominal superiors. It would be difficult.

He began succinctly, "Since the first directive was given me, we have set up one thousand two hundred and forty-two new shops, primarily in small villages, and three thousand eight hundred and nine contacts have been established, however tenuous in some cases, with Imperial government personnel, both military and civil."

He explained briefly his system of classifying the various individuals into groups on the basis of vocation, degree of importance and, what was more important, pitch of enthusiasm for the venture into which the empress had precipitated her adherents.

“From three scientists,” Hedrock went on, “who regard the weapon shops as an integral part of Isher civilization, we gained in the first ten days the secret of the science behind the time-energy machine in so far as that science is known to the government. We discovered that, of the four generals in charge of the enterprise, two were opposed to it from the beginning, a third was won over when the building disappeared, but the fourth, General Doocar, the man in charge, unfortunately will not abandon the attack until she does. He is an empress man in the sense of personal loyalty transcending his own feelings, and opinions.”

He paused, expecting them to comment. But no one said anything. Which was actually the most favorable response of all. Hedrock continued, “Some thousands of officers have deserted the Imperial forces, but only one member of the Imperial Council, Prince del Curtin, openly opposed the attack after the execution of Banton Vickers who, as you know, criticized the whole plan. And the prince’s method of disapproval has been to withdraw from the palace while the attack is in progress.

“Which brings us,” said Hedrock, “to the empress herself.” He summarized her character for them. The glorious Innelda, an orphan since her eleventh birthday, had been crowned when she was eighteen and was now twenty-five.

An age,” said Hedrock grimly, “which is an in-between stage in the development of the animal man to human man levels.”

He saw that they were puzzled by his reiteration of facts they all knew. But he had no intention of condensing his account. He had his own formula for defeating the empress and he wanted to state it at least once in as skillful a fashion as possible. "At twenty-five," he said, "our Innelda is emotional, unstable, brilliant, implacable, impatient of restrictions on her desires and just a bit unwilling to grow up. As the thousands of reports came in, it seemed to me finally that our best method of dealing with such a person was to leave channels along which she could withdraw gracefully when the crises came."

He looked around, questioningly. He was keenly aware that, with these men he dared not try to put his ideas over in a disguised form. He said frankly, "I hope that Council members will not take it amiss if I recommend for their consideration the following basic tactic. I am counting on some opportunity occurring of which we can take advantage and so bring her whole war machine to a stop. My assumption is that once it has stopped the empress will busy herself with other matters and conveniently forget all about the war she started."

Hedrock paused in order to give weight to his next words. "My staff and I will watch anxiously for the opportunity and will call your attention to anything that seems to have possibilities. And now, are there any questions?"

The first few were minor. Then a man said, "Have you any notion as to what form this so-called opportunity will take?"

Hedrock said carefully, "It would be difficult to go into all the avenues that we are exploring. This young woman is open on many fronts to persuasion and to pressure. She is having a hard time with recruits for the army. She is still subject to the connivances and intrigues of a group of older

people who are reluctant to accept her as an adult. They withhold information from her. Despite her efforts to keep in touch with what is going on, she is caught in an old, old net: Her communication with the real world is snarled up." Hedrock finished. "In one way or another we are trying to take advantage of these various weaknesses."

The man who had already spoken said, "This is only a formula."

"It is a formula," said Hedrock, "based on my study of the character of the empress."

"Don't you think you had better leave such studies to the Pp machine expert and to the No-men?"

"I examined all the weapon shop data on the lady before offering my suggestion."

"Still," said the man, "it is up to the elected Council to make decisions in such matters."

Hedrock did not back down. "I have made a suggestion," he said, "not a decision."

The man said nothing more. But Hedrock had his picture of a Council of very human members, jealous of their prerogatives. These people would not easily accept his decision, when he finally made it, on the problem of the see-saw drama that was being played to its still undetermined conclusion in ever remoter bends of time.

He saw that his audience was becoming restless. Eyes turned involuntarily toward the time map and several men glanced anxiously at their watches. Hastily Hedrock withdrew from the room with its almost invisible energy floors. Watching that pendulum could become a drug. The

brain itself would be weakened by the strain of attending a mechanism which recorded the spasms of real bodies in their movements through time itself.

It was bad enough to know that the building and the man were swinging steadily back and forth.

He arrived back in his office just in time to catch a 'stat call-up from Lucy.

" . . . in spite of my efforts," she said, "I was forced out of the Penny Palace. And when the doors shut I knew what was going to happen. I'm afraid he was taken to one of the houses of illusion, and you know what that means."

Hedrock nodded thoughtfully. He noted sharply that the girl seemed disturbed by her experience. "Among other things," he said slowly, "the illusion energies have some qualifying effect on callidity. The nature of the modification cannot be determined without subsequent measurement but it can be stated with reasonable certainty that his luck will never again take the direction of success at gambling."

He had delayed his reaction while he examined her face. Now he said with decision, "It is unfortunate that Clark has fallen prey to all these pitfalls of the city so easily. But since he was never more than a long-run possibility we can let him go without regret, particularly • and this cannot be stressed to often, as even the slightest interference in the natural progression of his life would cause later suspicion that would nullify any good he might do us.

"You may accordingly consider yourself detached from him. Further instructions will be given you in due course." He paused. "What's the matter, Lucy? Got an emotional fixation on him?"

Her expression left no doubt of it. Hedrock pressed on quietly, "When did you discover it?"

Whatever resistance had been in her, whatever fear of discovery, was gone. "It was when those other women were kissing him. You mustn't think," she added hastily, "that disturbed me. He'll go through quite a lot of it before he settles down."

"Not necessarily," said Hedrock earnestly. "You'll have to resign yourself to the house of illusion but it has been my observation that a fair percentage of men emerge from such an experience hard as steel in some respects but rather weary of worldliness."

He realized from her face that he had said enough. The groundwork for her future action was established. Results would follow in the natural course of events. He smiled a friendly smile. "That's all for now, Lucy. Don't let it get you down."

Her image and his faded from the screen in a flash.

Robert Hedrock glanced out of the door of his office several times during the next hour. At first the corridors seemed very busy. Gradually the activity died down and at last the corridor was clear.

He acted now with decision but without haste. From a wall safe he took the micro-film plans of the time control machine, the one in the room where he had talked to the weapon shop councilors a little more than two hours before. He had requested Information Center to send them to him and they had done so without comment. There was nothing unusual in their compliance. As head of the coordination department he had access to all the scientific knowledge of the weapon shops. He even had an explanation as to why he

wanted the plans in the event that he was asked. He wanted to study them, so his story would go, in the hope that some solution would suggest itself. But his reasons were private and his purpose personal.

With the films in his pocket he headed along the corridor toward the nearest stairway. He went down five flights and came to a section of the Hotel Royal Ganeel that was not occupied by the weapon shops. He unlocked an apartment door, went inside, and locked the door behind him.

It was an imposing suite, as befitted an 7 executive of the weapon shops, five rooms and a tremendous library. He went straight to the library, closed and locked the door, then carefully examined the place for spying devices. There were none, which was what he expected. As far as he knew he was not under suspicion. But he never took unnecessary chances.

Swiftly he held one of the rings on his finger against an ordinary looking electric socket. A loop of metal slid out. He inserted his finger into the loop and pulled. What happened in that moment was an ordinary enough weapon shop phenomenon. He was transmitted by a weapon shop matter transmitter a distance of about eleven hundred miles into one of his numerous laboratories. What was out of the ordinary about the action was that the presence of the transmitter was not known to the weapon shop council. The laboratory had for centuries been one of his many closely guarded secret retreats.

He decided that he could safely remain an hour. But that all he could hope to do in one night was to make another print of the microfilm. Building a duplicate machine would require many visits such as this. As it turned out he had time to make an extra print of the plans. Very carefully he

put the additional copy into a vault filing case, there to join the tens of thousands of other diagrams and plans to which, over a period of several thousand years, he had given an AA priority.

At the end of the hour, Earth's one immortal man, founder of the weapon shops, possessor of secrets unknown to any other living human being, returned to the library of his apartment in the Hotel Royal Ganeel.

Presently he was back in his office, five flights farther up.

Chapter XII

Lucy Rall emerged from the government 'stat booth, and she was hurrying through an alcove when she caught a glimpse of herself in an energy mirror. She stopped. The outside lights beckoned. The sidewalks were aglow with a brightness that defied the night. But she stood there in front of the reverse image of herself and stared at her pale face and tensed eyes.

She had always thought of herself as goodlooking, but the face that confronted her was too drawn to be pretty. She thought, "Is that what Mr. Hedrock saw?"

Out on the street, finally, she walked uncertainly along. She had made her call from a booth in one of the gambling palaces and the flashing brilliance of the famous Avenue of Luck was unabated. Magic street still, alive with swarms of human moths fluttering from one light source to another. The lights themselves blazed day and night, but the crowds would gradually fade away as the darkness of the upper skies waned. It was time for her also to go home. But she lingered in an unnatural indecision, knowing she could do nothing, wondering what she could do. The inner conflict drained her strength and twice within an hour she paused for energy drinks.

There was something else, also, a sense of personal disaster. She had always taken it for granted that she would eventually marry a weapon shop man. All though school and college, when her own application for membership was already approved, she had considered all others, the ordinary people, as outsiders. She thought with a piercing

comprehension, "It was that moment on the ship when he was in trouble. I was sorry for him."

He was in deeper trouble now. If she could possibly locate the house he had been taken to, she would, what? Her mind paused. She felt astounded at the forcefulness of the idea that came. Why, it was ridiculous. If she went to one of these places she would have to go through with an illusion, mentally and physically.

It seemed to her, shakily, that the weapon shops would separate her from their organization for even considering such a thing. But when her mind automatically flashed back over the fine print of the documents she had signed, she couldn't recall any prohibition. In fact, some of the sentences, as she remembered them, were positively sensational when examined in her present situation:

"... Weapon Shop people may marry according to their desire ... participate in, or partake of, any vice or pleasure of Isher for personal reasons ... There are no restrictions on the use made of a member's spare time by the member .

...

"It is, of course, taken for granted that no member will wish to do anything that might harm his or her standing with the Pp machine ... as everyone has been clearly told ... periodic examinations by the Pp will determine the status of a member's continuance with the shops.

"In the event that a member is discovered to have fallen below the requirements in any vital degree, the weapon shops will relieve the individual of all weapon shop memories and information the possession of which by unauthorized persons might be dangerous to the shops.

"The following vices and pleasures, when pursued with too much ardor, have proven in the past to be initial steps in the severance of relations . . ."

Among those she remembered as being mildly dangerous for women was "Houses of Illusion." She couldn't recall clearly but it seemed to her there had been a footnote in connection with that listing. Something about the danger not being in the pleasure itself but in the knowledge that the men in such places were nearly always unwilling slaves. Repeated experiences caused penetration of the ego with the result that what began as a search for a comparatively normal sensual adventure ended with the even bolder participation of the ego.

She came out of her intent memory reverie to realize that she was walking rapidly toward the special flash signal of a 'stat station. Within a minute she had her connection with the Weapon Shop Information Center. A few seconds later she tucked a 'stat duplicate of the 2,108 addresses of Houses of Illusion in her purse, and headed for the Penny Palace.

Her decision was made and from that moment she had not a thought of drawing back.

Inside the Penny Palace she saw things that Cayle could not possibly have observed without having the knowledge that she had. The play, she saw, was almost back to normal. A few of the hired people were still ostentatiously playing at games that would otherwise have been bare of players. The moment enough legitimate pleasure seekers were risking money on a machine the hirelings withdrew casually. Lucy headed toward the rear of the great room, pausing frequently and pretending to watch the play at various games. She* carried a weapon shop nullifier in her purse.

So she opened and shut doors leading to the manager's office without setting off the Imperial-type alarms.

Inside she depended entirely on her ring alarm to warn her of the approach of anyone. Coolly but swiftly she searched the office. First she pressed the machine-file activator, pecking out the key word illusion. The file-screen remained blank. She clicked off the word house. No response.

Surely he had the address of the house or houses with which he dealt. In a fury she snatched up the 'stat book and operated its activators. But there, too, house and illusion produced no response. Was it possible this man Martin, she had found his name on various documents, had connections with only a few houses and had their numbers in his head? Grimly, she realized it was very possible indeed.

She had no intention of leaving before she had exhausted all the possibilities of her position. She made a quick examination of the contents of the desk. Finding nothing she settled into the comfortable chair and waited. Not for long. Her finger tingled as the ring-alarm went off. She turned it, first toward one of the two doors, then the other. The active response came from the same door through which she had entered nearly fifteen minutes earlier. Whoever it was would now be in the corridor, his hand reaching for the office door.

The door opened, and the roly-poly man came in. He was humming softly to himself. The big desk and the chair in which she was sitting were so placed that he was inside before he saw that he had a visitor. He blinked at her with sea-blue eyes, a fatty little man, who had somehow, long ago, conquered all fear. The piglike eyes switched to the gun in her fingers, then back to her face, greedily.

“Pretty girl,” he said at last.

It was obviously not a complete reaction. Lucy waited. And finally it came, a purring question with an overtone of snarl. “What do you want?”

“My husband.”

From all angles that seemed to Lucy the best identification to make of herself. It was natural that there might be a Mrs. Cayle Clark in the background.

“Husband?” echoed the man blankly. He looked genuinely puzzled.

Lucy said in a monotone, “He was winning. I waited in the background, keeping an eye on him. Then I was forced out by a pushing crowd. When I tried to get back in the doors were locked. And when they opened he wasn’t there. I put two and two together and here I am.”

It wasn’t a long speech, but it covered the subject. It gave the picture of a worried, determined wife. And that was very important. It would be unfortunate if he suspected that the weapon shops were interested in Cayle Clark. She saw that understanding had come to the piglike man.

“Oh, you mean him.” He laughed curtly, his eyes watchful. “Sorry, young lady. I merely called a truckplane service that had contacts. What they do with the people they pick up I don’t know.”

Lucy said precisely, “What you mean is you don’t know the address to which they took him but you know the kind of place. Is that correct?”

He stared at her thoughtfully, as if trying to make up his mind about something. Finally, he shrugged. "House of Illusion," he said.

The fact that she had guessed that did not make the confirmation less valuable. Just as his apparent frankness did not mean that he was telling the truth. Lucy said, "I notice there's a Lambeth in the corner over there. Bring it here."

He brought it instantly. "You'll notice," he said, "I'm not resisting."

Lucy made no reply. She picked up the Lambeth cone and pointed it at the fat man. "What is your name?"

"Harj Martin."

The Lambeth needles remained stationary. Martin it was.

Before she could speak, the man said, "I'm prepared to give you all the information you want." He shrugged. "Doesn't mean a thing to me. We're protected. If you can locate the house your husband was taken to, go ahead. But you should know the houses have their own methods of getting rid of men when the police are called in."

There was a nervousness in his manner that interested Lucy. She looked at him with bright eyes. "You must be making plans," she said. "You would like to reverse our positions." She shook her head deprecatingly. "Don't try it. I would shoot."

"It's a weapon shop gun," Martin said, pointedly.

"Exactly," said Lucy. "It won't shoot unless you attack me.

That wasn't strictly true. Weapon shop members had special guns, that would shoot under fewer restrictions than the guns sold to consumers.

Martin sighed. "Very well," he said. "The name of the firm is Lowery Truckplanes."

The Lambeth needles indicated the name was correct. Lucy backed toward the door. "You're getting off easy," she said. "I hope you realize that."

The fat man nodded, licking his lips. She had a final mental picture of his blue eyes watching her warily, as if he still hoped to catch her off guard.

No further words were spoken. She opened the door, slipped through, and half a minute later was safely out on the street.

Anton Lowery was a blond giant who lifted himself sleepily from his pillow and stared stupidly at Lucy. He made no attempt to get up. He said finally, "I don't know where they would have taken him. It's just transportation business with us, you understand. The driver calls up houses at random, until he finds one that can use a man. We don't keep records."

He sounded vaguely indignant. Like an honest trucker whose business ethics were being questioned for the first time. Lucy wasted no time arguing the matter.

"Where can I locate the driver?" she asked.

It seemed the driver had gone off duty at 2 a.m. and was not due back for another 66 hours. "It's these unions," said Mr. Lowery. "Short hours, big pay and plenty of time off." Giving her the information seemed to bring him a

satisfaction, a sense of victory over her that detracted considerably from the indignation of his tone.

"Where does he live?" Lucy asked.

He hadn't the faintest idea. "Might get that from the union," he suggested. "They don't give us addresses."

It turned out that he couldn't remember the name of the union. The Lambeth, which she had brought with her from the Penny Palace, verified his statements one by one. Lucy sagged. In three days Cayle would be initiated into the sordid life of the houses of illusion. The dark thought aroused her to abrupt anger.

"Damn you!" she said savagely. "When the driver reports back to work, you get the address of the house from him. I'll call you ten minutes after he's due back and you'd better have the information."

Her tone and manner must have been convincing. For Anton Lowery assured her hastily that he had no objection to her gaining the information and would personally see to it that she got it. He was still protesting as she left his bedroom.

Outside Lucy had another energy drink at a corner automat, and realized it wasn't enough. Her watch showed a few minutes to 5 a.m. And her tense body told her it was time to go home to bed.

She reached her apartment without incident. Wearily, she undressed, and heavily climbed between the sheets. Her last conscious thought was: "Three days . . . would the time pass more slowly for the man who was enduring continuous pleasure? Or for herself who knew that pleasure prolonged was the greatest pain of all?

She slept on that thought like an overtired child.

Chapter XIII

AS SOON AS SHE HAD THE ADDRESS OF THE HOUSE SHE called up Hedrock. He listened thoughtfully to her account, then nodded.

“Good work,” he said. “Well back you up. I’ll send a warship over, very high up. And if we don’t hear from you in a reasonable time we’ll raid.” He hesitated. “I hope you realize that the only way we can justify such action is if you leave no doubt in Clark’s mind that your reasons are purely personal. Are you prepared to go that far?”

He didn’t need to ask the question. The haggard face that stared at him from the ’stat screen left no doubt of the extent of her fixation. This girl was emotionally wrought up. He felt a qualm of pity, and yet, he realized, he was not responsible for her feelings. He had merely recognized them, and used his knowledge of psychology to intensify her pursuit. A callidetic of the measurement of Cayle Clark would yet make himself felt in Isher. The chance that the impact would affect the war itself was not impossible. Once started on the right path, the pace of activity, the pattern of callidity, would be a direct moving cube, piling up so fast that no human brain would grasp the extent of what was happening until afterwards.

If only there were some way of discovering what form it would take, Hedrock shook himself inwardly. He was not given to wishful thinking. They would simply have to watch Clark’s movements and hope that they would recognize the moment when it arrived. He saw that the girl was waiting for him to speak again. His thoughts grew instantly sharp.

He said, "What time is your appointment? Tonight or tomorrow?"

"Tonight at ten-thirty." She managed a grim smile. "The receptionist insisted I be on time. Apparently, they can hardly handle the business they get."

"Supposing he isn't among those available at that time, what will you say?"

"I gather that there is a complete illusion break at that time. The men and women are then allowed to select partners. However, if he shouldn't be available, I shall not be either. I shall be very finicky."

"Do you think Clark will recognize you?" He saw that she didn't understand what he meant. He explained. "The illusions leave after-image hallucinations which interfere with visual perception."

Lucy said, "I'll make him recognize me."

She described several methods she would use. Hedrock considered them, then shook his head. "It's obvious," he said, "that you've never been in a house. These people are perpetually, endlessly, suspicious. Until you are actually in a state of illusion your chances of saying anything that is not overheard are dim. Once the automatic machines begin radiating stimuli they don't worry about you any more. Bear in mind and adjust yourself to any situation that may come up."

Lucy was recovered from her shock. After the afternoon she and Cayle had spent together she had felt sure of him. "He'll recognize me," she said firmly.

Hedrock said nothing to that. He had merely wanted to point out the problem. Three days and nights of illusions was a long time. Even if there were no after images, the brain was dulled, the body's capacity for life temporarily at low ebb, no energy for memory.

Lucy was speaking again. "I'd better get ready. Goodbye, Mr. Hedrock."

"All the luck in the world, Lucy," said Hedrock. "But don't call for help unless it's absolutely necessary."

Hedrock did not leave the 'stat the moment the connection was broken. During this period of emergency he lived in an apartment adjoining the coordination office. His work was his life. Virtually all his waking hours were spent at his desk. Now he called the weapon shop naval headquarters and ordered them to dispatch a protective warship. And still he was not satisfied. Frowning, he considered the potentialities of Lucy's position and finally called for her secret file. In two minutes, by weapon shop interspatial transportation, the remote Information Center precipitated the plate onto the table in front of him. First, he checked the facts, comprehension 110, horizon 118, plethora 105, dominance 151, ego 120, emotional index 150.

Hedrock paused there. Compared to the norm of 100, not forgetting the average of 85, Lucy was a fine, intelligent girl with a somewhat high-category emotional capacity. It was that that had brought her into the affair. After Cayle Clark was identified (by a routine check-up on the crowds that gathered before a new weapon shop) as a callidetic giant it was decided to contact him through the medium of an unmarried woman with a high emotion index.

Deliberately* the weapon makers' Council anticipated that the callidetic would excite fixation in Lucy. There were other factors involved in her selection, mostly sanity safeguards for a young woman who was going to be subjected to unnatural stresses. For one thing it was desirable, from the point of view of the girl's happiness, that the attraction be mutual for the time being. Permanency, of course, could not be guaranteed in a changing world.

One by one Hedrock examined the factors applicable to the present situation. At last he sighed. He felt sorry for Lucy. The weapon shops did not normally interfere with the private lives of their members or of anyone. Only the unparalleled emergency justified using an individual human being as a pawn.

Thought of the emergency drew his mind. He returned the file to Information Center then switched on the 'stat again. He manipulated it intently, rejected several images that resulted from the "draw" of energy in the room he was aiming at and finally had what he wanted, the map of time. He had no difficulty locating the large shadow. It was lying six weeks and a day in the future. The tiny shadow was harder to find. He saw it then, a minute black point on the curving vastness of the map. It seemed to be approximately a million million years in the past. Hedrock closed his eyes, and strove to visualize the span of time. He couldn't. The energy locked up in McAllister was too great now for planetary comparisons. The problem of exploding it was a logic nightmare.

When at last he shut off the 'stat, he experienced a great weariness, and an incredulous wonder that, after all this time he still didn't have even a tentative solution to the deadliest danger that had ever confronted the entire Solar System.

He spent the next hour studying precis of reports that had been filed by other agents throughout the day. Lucy didn't know that she was among the few dozen agents who obtained immediate and direct access to him at any time of the day or night. Those not so favored talked to machines or to any one of a dozen executives who alternated on a three-shift basis.

Again and again the condensed accounts required more thorough investigation. Not once did he begrudge the time. Not once did he let himself feel rushed. Each report was examined in the detail that he considered necessary.

Ten-thirty came and, though he was aware that Lucy must now have arrived at the house, he paused only briefly and called the weapon shop warship, which was hovering high above the place. For a moment he examined the house itself as it showed through a telescope, a toylike structure in a suburban estate that seemed all garden. Then, the picture of it clear in his mind, he turned to his work.

Chapter XIV

AS SHE PUSHED OPEN THE GATE, LUCY FELT A WARM glow sweep through her. She stopped, almost in mid-stride.

The sensation of warmth, she knew, had been artificially induced. This was the first step of pleasure leading up to the strange heights of sensory joys offered by a House of Illusion. There would be scarcely a moment from now until she left the grounds that some new, perhaps insidious and unsuspected manipulation of her nervous system would not be occurring.

The brief indecisiveness yielded to her purpose. Slowly, she walked forward, studying the house as she did so. The House of Illusion was set well back from the street in grounds that were beautifully landscaped. Flowers and shrubs protruded cunningly from a score of breaks in the abundant stone that made up the larger part of the yard. A massive screen of gigantic green-fronded plants started about a hundred feet from the entrance of the building, and almost hid it from view.

She walked under them, and came presently to an entrance that built up gradually, beginning as a low fence that soon towered higher than her head, and finally curved up above her to form a gleaming roof. She could see the end of it nearly fifty yards ahead.

Twice, involuntarily, she slowed. The first time, something soft seemed to caress her face. It was almost as if a loving hand reached out and delicately touched her, with affectionate fingers. The second time, the result was more dramatic. She caught her breath suddenly. A flush burned

her face and spread warmly down her body. She felt embarrassed yet happy, a little shy but excited. She couldn't help wondering if this could be how a young girl might feel on her wedding night.

It was in just such nuances that the House of Illusion excelled. Here, tired old roues, men and women both, could recapture for a price otherwise lost emotions of their abused bodies.

She reached the turning of the corridor, and found herself confronted by an alcove fitted with scores of mirrors. She moved toward them hesitantly. Wondering if they could be doors, disturbed by the possibility that she might choose the wrong one. She paused finally, and waited for one of the doors to open. But after a minute or so, nothing had happened; so she began to push against the face of first one mirror, then another.

The first six were solid, as if there was an unmovable wall behind them. The seventh opened easily, and proved to be a swinging door. She went through it into a corridor that was only a little wider than her body. Her shoulders kept brushing the walls, and she had an uneasy feeling of being closed in, a distinct sensation of the space being too narrow for comfort. It was more than a physical feeling. It was in her mind, associated with fears of confined places, somehow connected with all the unknown things that could happen to a person who, if anything went wrong, could only move forward or backward.

She wondered if the uneasiness might possibly derive from her own tension, the knowledge that she was here for a purpose that had nothing to do with the normal business of the establishment. She was against what went on in such a place. She intended to disrupt at least a part of their

organization. Her anxiety might well derive from the possibility that her motives could be discovered before she could do what she wanted to do. It seemed reasonable that the regular customers of this abode would not be alarmed by a narrow passageway, knowing as they undoubtedly did where it ended.

Her fears faded as quickly as they had begun. She felt a sudden anticipation of immeasurable joy about to be experienced. Breathlessly, she came to the end of the corridor, and pushed at the narrow wall-end that was there. It opened easily, and this time, to her relief, she saw that she had come to a small though nicely furnished room. As she entered, she saw that a woman sat behind a desk just left of the door. Lucy stopped, and the woman said:

“Sit down, please. Naturally, there has to be an interview the first time someone visits our establishment.”

She was a woman of forty or so, with classically good-looking face, except that her eyes were narrowed and her lips drawn into a thin line. Silently she indicated a chair, and Lucy sat down without a word. The woman began:

“You understand, my dear, that everything you tell me will be kept confidential. In fact.” Her lips made the motions of a smile, and she touched her forehead with a manicured finger. “it never gets beyond here. But I must tell you that I have a perfect memory. Once I hear somebody talk, or see someone, I never forget them.”

Lucy said nothing. She had met a number of individuals with eidetic memories; and she accepted the woman’s statement that she had such a memory. From all the accounts that she herself had heard of the Houses of Illusion, no record had ever been found of the customers.

Apparently, this house kept its records inside the mind of someone who could remember such things.

The woman went on, "This means, of course, that we operate on a strictly cash basis. What is your annual income?"

"Five thousand credits." Lucy did not hesitate.

"Where do you work?"

Lucy named a firm well-known in the city. All this was simple, and long prepared for by the weapon shops. Every weapon shop member was listed as a worker in an organization which was either secretly owned by the shops or else owned by a weapon shop supporter. Thus, if a member was questioned in the normal routine of Isher commercial life, legitimate and checkable answers could be given.

"How much rent do you pay?" asked the woman.

"One hundred credits a month."

"And your food bills come to what?"

"Oh, fifty, sixty, something like that."

The woman said thoughtfully, half to herself:

"Transportation, ten; clothes, twenty-five; miscellaneous, ten, that leaves you a good twenty-five hundred a year for extras. If you wanted to come here once a week, you could do it at fifty credits each. However, we'll make you a discount for emergencies. Thirty-five credits, please."

Lucy counted out the money, startled by the ruthlessness of the calculations involved. Actually, her income had other

charges on it, a thousand credits income tax, for instance. Her clothes bill was much higher than twenty-five credits. And yet, and yet, she could, if necessary, if her craving for pleasure over-reached her caution, get by on even less than the woman had indicated. Inherent in the other's calculations was the obvious fact that a person on the downward path would want to come oftener than once a week. In such an event, she could move to cheaper quarters, buy less expensive clothes, eat less, there were many short cuts possible, and all of them as old as human corruption.

The woman placed the money in a drawer, and stood up.
"Thank you, my dear. I hope we have a long and mutually satisfying association. Through this door, please."

It was another concealed door, and it led to a broad corridor with an open doorway at the end of it. As she approached it, Lucy saw that it was a large and luxurious bedroom. The size of it was apparent even before she reached it. Several things about it made her suspicious, and so she did not enter immediately, but paused instead on the threshold, and studied the interior. She must, she told herself, remember that this was a House of Illusion. Here, what would normally seem real, might be nothing but fantasy. She recalled the clues Hedrock had given her as to how to detect the mechanically induced delusions. And presently she saw that if she let herself look at the room out of the corners of her eyes, the scene blurred curiously, particularly at the very edge of her vision. She seemed to see the figure of a woman, and there was a suggestion of the room being larger than it appeared now.

Lucy smiled, walked towards the far wall, straight through it, solid though it seemed, and found herself in an enormous room that glittered with mirrors along three of its walls. A

woman attendant hurried towards her, and bowed apologetically. "You will please pardon us, Miss. But since this is your first visit to our establishment, it was necessary to assume that you knew nothing of our little bag of tricks. Did you learn about this particular illusion from a friend, or have you been to other houses?"

It was a pointed question; and Lucy knew better than to evade it. "I heard a friend describe it, she said truthfully.

The answer seemed satisfactory. The woman, a small, vivacious looking blonde, led the way to what turned out to be a mirror door. "Please change your clothes, she said, "and then go through the door on the far side."

Lucy found herself in a small dressing room. An attractive white dress hung on a hanger against one wall. A pair of sandals were on the floor. Nothing else. She undressed slowly, beginning suddenly to feel committed. It was going to be difficult indeed to get out of this situation. If she failed to contact Cayle during the time that would be available, then she might find herself experiencing what this house had to offer whether she wanted to or not.

The white dress was wonderfully soft to her touch; and as she slipped it over her head, the feel of it on her skin brought a gasp of delight from her lips. The creation was made of a special costly cloth that was designed to affect only the pleasure nerves of the body. Its cost was more than a hundred credits a yard.

She stood for a long moment, letting the sensation of pleasure creep over her. Abruptly, excitement swept her. She swayed dizzily, and thought: "It really doesn't matter. Whatever happens here tonight, I'm going to have fun."

She slipped her feet cozily into the sandals, staggered a little as she fumbled for the catch of the door; and then, steady again, opened it, and stood blinking at a vista-like room where men sat at tables along one wall and women along the opposite wall. The walls glittered with colorful plastic designs. A great liquor bar spread all across the side of the room facing her. Lucy made a half-hearted attempt to test for illusion by looking at the scene out of the corners of her eyes. But she didn't worry about it. This was it. Here was the concourse room. In a few minutes she would have her chance to get Cayle. If she didn't make contact, well, it didn't matter. There were other nights. So she told herself hazily.

She walked out into the room, swaggering a little. Scornfully, she surveyed the other women, sitting at their little tables, drinking from tiny glasses. Most were older than she was, older by a great deal. Abruptly bored by her competition, she glanced towards the men on the far side of the room. She saw with momentary interest that what had seemed one room was in reality two. A transparent barrier ran the full length of the room from ceiling to floor, dividing the men from the women. It was possible, of course, that the barrier also was an illusion. And that it would disappear either for individuals or for the entire group at the right moment. Lucy, who knew something of the energies involved in the processes by which the houses achieved their effects, guessed that such a joining of the two sections would eventually occur.

The thought faded from her mind, as she ran her gaze rapidly along the line of men. Without exception, they were relatively young people. Her eyes were past Cayle before she recognized him. She started to bring them back for a second look, but just in time a basic pattern of caution stopped her. Already beginning to sober up after her brief

emotional intoxication, she turned toward one of the small tables, and walked to it carrying with her the mental image of him.

She sat down, the high exhilaration gone out of her. She felt miserable with a remembrance of the disaster she had seen on his face. Haggard, worn-out unhappy Cayle Clark, that was the vision she had. She wondered doubtfully if by any chance his glazed eyes had seen her. She thought finally: "I'll look again in a minute. And this time, I'll try to attract his attention."

She looked steadily at her watch, determined not to be rushed. The hands showed five seconds of the end of the minute when a slim little man came out of the alcove, and raised his hand. Lucy glanced hastily toward Cayle, saw with a sudden lift that he was watching her, and then heard the little man say in a cheerful tone:

"Down goes the barrier, folks. Now's the time to get acquainted."

There were different reactions to the signal. Most of the women remained seated. Several, however, got up hastily and hurried across the room. Lucy, sensing that Cayle was coming toward her, stayed where she was. He sank down into the chair opposite her, and said steadily, "I think you're very attractive, Miss."

She nodded her acceptance of the compliment, not trusting herself to speak. An attendant bent down beside her.

"Satisfactory, Miss?" The question was softly spoken.

Lucy inclined her head again. The attendant said, "This way."

She stood up, thinking: "As soon as we're alone, we can start to plan."

There was a sudden flurry of excitement at one of the doors. The woman who had originally interviewed Lucy rushed in, and spoke in a low tone to the little man. A moment later, a bell began to ring. Lucy half-turned; and, doing so, in some curious fashion lost her balance. She felt herself falling into darkness...

Hedrock was still in his office at five minutes after eleven when the 'stat buzzed, and Lucy's face came on the screen. She shook her head in bewilderment. "I don't know what happened. Things seemed to be going along all right. He recognized me without giving away that he knew me, and we were apparently about to be led to some private room, when everything went black. The next thing I knew I was here in my apartment."

"Just a moment," Hedrock said.

He broke the connection, and called the warship. The commander shook his head. "I was just about to call you. There was a police raid, and the warning must have been very short, because they loaded the women into carplanes, half a dozen to a machine, and carted them off to their homes."

"What about the men?" Hedrock was tense. In emergencies the house sometimes had nasty habits.

"That's why I didn't call you immediately. I saw them pile the men into a truckplane, and cart them off. I followed, but they used the usual method."

"I see," said Hedrock. He covered his eyes with one shielding hand, and groaned inwardly. The problem of Cayle

Clark was becoming complex again, and there was nothing to do but to let him go. "Okay, Captain," he said gloomily. "Good work."

He clicked off, called Lucy again, and gave her the news. 'I'm sorry," he said, "but that eliminates him from the picture. We don't dare interfere."

"What'll I do?" she asked.

"Just wait," he said. "Wait."

That was all there was to say.

Chapter XV

Fara worked. He had nothing else to do, and the thought was often in his mind that now he would be doing it till the day he died. Fool that he was, he told himself a thousand times how big a fool, he kept hoping that Cayle would walk into the shop and say:

“Father, I’ve learned my lesson. If you can ever forgive me, teach me the business, and then you retire to a well-earned rest.”

It was on August 26th that the telestat clicked on just after Fara had finished lunch. “Money call,” it sighed. “Money call.”

Fara and Creel looked at each other. “Eh,” said Fara finally, “money call for us.”

He could see from the gray look in Creel’s face the thought that was in her mind. He said under his breath: “Damn that boy!”

But he felt relieved. Amazingly, relieved! Cayle was beginning to appreciate the value of parents. He switched on the viewer. “Come and collect,” he said.

The face that came on the screen was heavy-jowled, beetle-browed and strange. The man said: “This is Clark Pearton of the Fifth Bank of Ferd. We have received a sight draft on you for ten thousand credits. With carrying charges and government tax, the sum required will be twelve thousand one hundred credits. Will you pay it now or will you come in this afternoon and pay it?”

“B-but . . . b-but.” said Fara. “W-who...” He stopped, conscious of the heavy-faced man saying something about the money having been paid out to Cayle Clark, that morning, on emergency call. At last Fara found his voice: “But the bank had no right,” he expostulated, “to pay out the money without my authority.”

The voice cut him off coldly. “Are we then to inform our central that the money was obtained under false pretenses? Naturally, an order will be issued immediately for the arrest of your son.”

“Wait . . . wait...” Fara spoke blindly. He was aware of Creel beside him, shaking her head at him. She was white, and her voice was a sick, stricken thing, as she said:

“Fara, let him go. He’s through with us. We must be as hard. Let him go.”

The words rang senselessly in Fara’s ears. They didn’t seem to fit into any normal pattern. He was saying: “I... I haven’t got... How about my paying... installments?”

“If you wish a loan,” said Clerk Pearton, “naturally we will be happy to go into the matter. I might say that when the draft arrived, we checked up on your status, and we are prepared to loan you eleven thousand credits on indefinite call with your shop as security. I have the form here, and if you are agreeable, we will switch this call through the registered circuit, and you can sign at once.”

“Fara, no!”

The clerk went on: “The other eleven hundred credits will have to be paid in cash. Is that agreeable?”

"Yes, yes, of course. I've got twenty-five hund." He stopped his chattering tongue with a gulp, then: "Yes, that's satisfactory."

The deal completed, Fara whirled on his wife. Out of the depths of his hurt and bewilderment, he raged: "What do you mean, standing there and talking about not paying it? You said several times that I was responsible for him being what he is. Besides, we don't know why he needed the money. He said it was an emergency."

Creel said in a low, dead voice, "In one hour he's stripped us of our savings. He must have done it deliberately, thinking of us as two old fools who wouldn't know any better than to pay it."

"All I see," Fara interrupted, "is that I have saved our name from disgrace."

His high sense of duty rightly done lasted until midafternoon, when the baliff from Ferd came to take over the shop.

"But what." Fara began.

The baliff said, "The Automatic Atomic Repair Shops, Limited, took over your loan from the bank and are foreclosing."

"It's unfair," said Fara. "I'll take it to court. He was thinking dazedly: If the empress ever learned of this, she'd... she'd..."

The courthouse was a big, gray building; and Fara felt emptier and colder every second, as he walked along the gray corridors. In Glay, his decision not to give himself into the hands of a lawyer had seemed a wise act. Here, in these

enormous halls and palatial rooms, it seemed the sheerest folly.

He managed, nevertheless, to give an account of the criminal act of the bank in first giving Cayle the money, then turning over the note to his chief competitor, apparently within minutes of his signing it. He finished with, "I'm sure, sir, the empress would not approve of such goings-on against honest citizens."

"How dare you," said the cold-voiced person on the bench, "use the name of her holy majesty in support of your own gross self-interest?"

Fara shivered. The sense of being intimately a member of the empress' great human family yielded to a sudden chill and a vast mind-picture of the ten million icy courts like this, and the myriad malevolent and heartless men, like this, who stood between the empress and her loyal subject, Fara. He thought passionately: If the empress knew what was happening here, how unjustly he was being treated, she would, or would she?

He pushed the terrible doubt out of his mind, came out of his reverie with a start, to hear the Cadi saying. "Plaintiff's appeal dismissed, with costs assessed at seven hundred credits, to be divided between the court and the defense solicitor in the ratio of five to two. See to it that the appellant does not leave until the costs are paid. Next case."

Fara went alone the next day to see Creel's mother. He called first at "Farmer's Restaurant" on the outskirts of the village. The place was, he noted with satisfaction in the thought of the steady stream of money flowing in, half full,

though it was only mid-morning. But madame wasn't there. Try the feed store.

He found her in the back of the feed store, overseeing the weighing out of grain into cloth measures. The hard-faced old woman heard his story without a word. She said finally, curtly:

"Nothing doing, Fara. I'm one who has to make loans often from the bank to swing deals. If I tried to set you up in business, I'd find the Automatic Atomic Repair people getting after me. Besides, I'd be a fool to turn money over to a man who lets a bad son squeeze a fortune out of him. Such a man has no sense about worldly things. And I won't give you a job because I don't hire relatives in my business." She finished. "Tell Creel to come and live at my house. I won't support a man, though. That's ah."

He watched her disconsolately for a while, as she went on calmly superintending the clerks who were manipulating the old, no longer accurate measuring machines. Twice her voice echoed through the dust-filled interior, each time with a sharp: "That's overweight, a gram at least. Watch your machine."

Though her back was turned, Fara knew by her posture that she was still aware of his presence. She turned at last with an abrupt movement, and said, "Why don't you go to the weapon shop? You haven't anything to lose, and you can't go on like this."

Fara went out then, a little blindly. At first the suggestion that he buy a gun and commit suicide had no real personal application. But he felt immeasurably hurt that his mother-in-law should have made it. Kill himself? It was ridiculous. He was still a young man, just going on fifty. Given the

proper chance, with his skilled hands, he would wrest a good living even in the world where automatic machines were encroaching everywhere. There was always room for a man who did a good job. His whole life had been based on that credo.

He went home to find Creel packing. "It's the common sense thing to do," she said. "We'll rent the house and move into rooms."

He told her about her mother's offer to take her m, watching her face as he spoke. Creel shrugged. "I told her 'No' yesterday," she said thoughtfully. "I wonder why she mentioned it to you."

Fara walked swiftly over to the great front window overlooking the garden with its flowers, its pool, its rookery. He tried to think of Creel away from this garden of hers, this home of two thirds a lifetime, Creel living in rooms. And knew what her mother had meant. There was one more hope. He waited until Creel went upstairs, then called Mel Dale on the telestat. The mayor's plump face took on an uneasy expression as he saw who it was. But he listened pontifically, said finally, "Sorry, the council does not loan money; and I might as well tell you, Fara- I have nothing to do with this, mind you, but you can't get a license for a shop any more."

"Wh-what?"

"I'm sorry!" The mayor lowered his voice. "Listen, Fara, take my advice and go to the weapon shop. These places have their uses."

There was a click, and Fara sat staring at the blank face of the viewing screen.

So it was to be death!

Chapter XVI

It took two months of living in one room to make up his mind. He waited until the street was deserted, then slipped across the boulevard, past a design of flower gardens, and so to the door of the weapon shop. The brief fear came that the door wouldn't open, but it did, effortlessly. As he emerged from the dimness of the alcove into the shop proper, he saw the silver-haired old man sitting in a corner chair, reading under a softly bright light. The old man looked up, put aside his book, then rose to his feet.

"It's Mr. Clark," he said quietly. "What can we do for you?"

A faint flush crept into Fara's cheeks. He had hoped that he would not suffer the humiliation of being recognized. But now that his fear was realized, he stood his ground stubbornly. The important thing about killing himself was that there be nobody for Creel to bury at great expense. Neither knife nor poison would satisfy that basic requirement. "I want a gun," said Fara, "that can be adjusted to disintegrate a body six feet in diameter in a single shot. Have you that kind?"

The old man turned to a showcase and brought forth a sturdy revolver that glinted with all the soft colors of the inimitable Ordine plastic. The man said in a precise voice, "Notice the flanges on this barrel are little more than bulges. This makes the model ideal for carrying in a shoulder holster under the coat. It can be drawn very swiftly because, when properly attuned, it will leap toward the reaching hand of its owner. At the moment it is attuned to me. Watch while I replace it in its holster and."

The speed of the draw was amazing. The old man's fingers moved; and the gun, four feet away, was in them. There was no blur of movement. It was like the door the night that it had slipped from Fara's grasp, and slammed noiselessly in Constable Jor's face. Instantaneous!

Fara, who had parted his lips, as the old man was explaining, to protest the needlessness of illustrating any quality of the weapon except what he had asked for, closed them again. He stared in fascination. And something of the wonder that was here held his mind and his body. He had seen and handled the guns of soldiers, and they were simply ordinary metal or plastic things that one used clumsily like any other material substance, not like this at all, not possessed of a dazzling life of their own, leaping with an intimate eagerness to assist with all then-superb power the will of their master.

With a start, Fara remembered his purpose. He smiled wryly, and said, "All this is very interesting. But what about the beam that can fan out?"

The old man said calmly, "At pencil thickness, this beam will pierce any body except certain alloys of lead up to four hundred yards. With proper adjustment of the firing nozzle, you can disintegrate a six-foot object at fifty yards or less. This screw is the adjuster."

He indicated a tiny device in the muzzle itself. "Turn it to the left to spread the beam, to the right to close it."

Fara said, "I'll take the gun. How much is it?"

He saw that the old man was looking at him thoughtfully. The oldster said finally, slowly, "I have previously explained our regulations to you, Mr. Clark. You recall them, of course?"

"Eh!" said Fara, and stopped, wide-eyed. "You mean," he gasped, "those things actually apply. They're not." Tense and cold, he finished. "All I want is a gun that will shoot in self-defense, but which I can turn on myself if I have to, or want to."

"Oh, suicide!" said the old man. He looked as if a great understanding had dawned on him. "My dear sir, we have no objection to you killing yourself at any time. That is your personal privilege in a world where privileges grow scantier every year. As for the price of this revolver, it's four credits."

"Four . . . only four credits!" said Fara.

He stood astounded, his mind snatched from its dark purpose. Why, the plastic alone was, and the whole gun with its fine, intricate workmanship, twenty-five credits would have been cheap. He felt a thrill of interest. The mystery of the weapon shops suddenly loomed as vast and important as his own black destiny. But the old man was speaking again:

"And now, if you will remove your coat, we can put on the holster."

Automatically, Fara complied. It was vaguely startling to realize that, in a few seconds, he would be walking out of here, equipped for self-murder, and that there was now not a single obstacle to his death. Curiously, he was disappointed. He couldn't explain it, but somehow there had been in the back of his mind a hope that these shops might, just might, what?

What indeed? Fara sighed. And grew aware again of the old man's voice:

“Perhaps you would prefer to step out of our side door. It is less conspicuous than the front.”

There was no resistance in Fara. He was conscious of the man’s fingers on his arm, half guiding him; and then the old man pressed one of several buttons on the wall, -so that’s how it was done, and there was the door. He could see flowers beyond the opening. Without a word he walked toward them. He was outside almost before he realized it.

Chapter XVII

Fara stood for a moment in the neat little path-way, striving to grasp the finality of his situation. But nothing would come except awareness of many men around him. His mind was like a log drifting along a stream at night. Through that darkness grew a consciousness of something wrong. The wrongness was there in the back of his mind as he turned leftward to go to the front of the weapon shop. Vagueness transformed to a startled sense of shock. For he was not in Glay, and the weapon shop was not where it had been.

A dozen men brushed past Fara to join a long line of men farther along. But Fara was immune to their presence, their strangeness. His mind, his vision, his very being was concentrating on the section of machine that stood where the weapon shop had been. His brain lifted up, up in his effort to grasp the tremendousness of the dull-metaled immensity of what was spread here under a summer sun beneath a sky as blue as a remote southern sea.

The machine towered into the heavens, five great tiers of metal, each a hundred feet high; and the superbly streamlined five hundred feet ended in a peak of light, a that tilted straight up a sheer two hundred feet farther, and matched the sun for brightness.

And it was a machine, not a building, because the whole lower tier was alive with shimmering lights, mostly green, but sprinkled colorfully with red and occasionally blue and yellow. Twice, as Fara watched, green lights directly in front of him flashed unscintillatingly into red.

The second tier glowed with white and red lights, although there were only a fraction as many lights as on the lowest tier. The third section had on its dull-metal surface lights of blue and yellow; they twinkled softly here and there over the vast area.

The fourth tier was a series of signs, that brought the beginning of comprehension. The whole sign was:

WHITE-BIRTHS

RED-DEATHS

GBEEN-LIVING

BLUE-IMMIGRATION TO EAHTH

YELLOW-EMIGRATION

The fifth tier was all sign, finally explaining:

SOLAR SYSTEM 11,474,463,747

EARTH 11,193,247,361

MARS 97,298,604

VENUS 141,053,811

MOONS 42,863,971

The numbers changed, even as he looked at them, leaping up and down, shifting below and above what they had first been. People were dying, being born, moving to Mars, to Venus, to the moons of Jupiter, to Earth's moon, and others coming back again, landing minute by minute in the scores of spaceports. Life went on in its gigantic fashion, and here was the record.

“Better get in line,” said a friendly voice beside Fara. “It takes quite a while to put through an individual case, I understand.”

Fara stared at the man. He had the impression of having had senseless words flung at him. “In line?” he started, then stopped himself with a jerk that hurt his throat.

He was moving forward, blindly, ahead of the younger man, thinking a jumble about this having been the way that Constable Jor was transported to Mars, when another of the man’s words penetrated.

“Case?” said Fara violently. “Individual case!”

The man, a heavy-faced, blue-eyed young chap of around thirty-five, looked at him curiously: ‘You must know why you’re here,’ he said. “Surely, you wouldn’t have been sent through here unless you had a problem of some kind that the weapon shop courts will solve for you: there’s no other reason for coming to Information Center.

Fara walked on because he was in the line now, a fast-moving line that curved him inexorably around the machine; and seemed to be heading him toward a door that led into the interior of the great metal structure.

So it was a building as well as a machine.

A problem, he was thinking, why of course, he had a problem. A hopeless, insoluble, completely tangled problem so deeply rooted in the basic structure of Imperial civilization that the whole world would have to be overturned to make it right.

With a start, he saw that he was at the entrance. He thought with awe: In seconds he could be committed

irrevocably, to what?

Chapter XVIII

Inside the weapon shop Information Center, Fara moved along a wide, shining corridor. Behind him, the young man said:

“There’s a side corridor, practically empty. Let’s go.”

Fara turned into it, trembling. He noticed that at the end of the hallway were a dozen young women sitting at desks interviewing men. He stopped in front of one of the girls. She was older than she had looked from a distance, over thirty, but goodlooking, alert. She smiled pleasantly but impersonally, and said:

“Your name, please?”

He gave it, and added a mumble about being from the village of Glay. The woman said:

“Thank you. It will take a few minutes to get your file. Won’t you sit down?”

He hadn’t noticed the chair. He sank into it, and his heart was beating so wildly that he felt choked. There was scarcely a thought in his head, nor a real hope; only an intense, almost mind-wrecking excitement. He realized, suddenly, that the girl was speaking to him, but only snatches of what she said came through that screen of tension in his mind:

“... Information Center is ... in effect ... a bureau of statistics. Every person born . . . registered here . . . their education, change of address . . . occupation ... and the

highlights of their life. The whole is maintained by . . . combination of . . . unauthorized and unsuspected liaison with . . . Imperial Chamber of Statistics and . . . through medium of agents . . . every community..."

It seemed to Fara that he was missing vital information, and that if he could only force his attention and hear more, He strained, but it was of no use. His nerves were jumping too madly for him to focus his mind on what she was saying. He tried to speak, but before he could force words out of his trembling lips, there was a click, and a thin, dark plate slid onto the woman's desk. She took it up and examined it. After a moment, she said something into a mouthpiece, and in a short time two more plates precipitated out of the empty air onto her desk. She studied them impassively, looked up finally.

"You will be interested to know," she said, "that your son, Cayle, is on Mars."

"Eh?" said Fara. He half rose from his chair, but before he could say anything the young woman was speaking again, firmly:

"I must inform you that the weapon shops take no action against individuals. We are not concerned with moral correction. That must come naturally from the individual, and from the people as a whole. and now if you will give me a brief account of your problem for the record and the court."

Sweating, Fara sank back into his seat; most desperately, he wanted more information about Cayle. He began: "But . . . but what . . . how..." He caught himself; and in a low voice described what had happened. When he finished, the girl said:

"You will proceed now to the Name Room; watch for your name, and when it appears go straight to Room 474. Remember, 474, and now, the line is waiting, if you please."

She smiled politely, and Fara was moving off almost before he realized it. He half turned to ask another question, but an old man was sinking into his chair. Fara hurried on, along a great corridor, conscious of curious blasts of sound coming from ahead.

Eagerly, he opened the door; and the sound crashed at him with all the impact of a sledge-hammer blow. It was such a colossal, incredible sound that he stopped just inside the door, shrinking back. He stood then, trying to blink sense into a visual confusion that revealed in magnitude the tornado of noise.

Men, men, men everywhere; men by the thousands in a long, broad auditorium, packed into rows of seats, pacing with an abandon of restlessness up and down the aisles, and all of them staring with frantic interest at a long board marked off into squares, each square lettered from the alphabet. The tremendous board with its lists of names ran the full length of the immense room. The Name Room, Fara thought shakily as he sank into a seat. And his name would come up in the C's.

It was like sitting in at a no-limit poker game, watching the jewel-precious cards turn up. It was like playing the exchange with all the world at stake during a stock crash. It was nerve-wracking, dazzling, exhausting, fascinating, terrible.

New names kept flashing on to the twenty-six squares; and men would shout like insane beings and some fainted, and the uproar was shattering; the pandemonium raged on, one

continuous, unbelievable sound. And every few minutes a great sign would flash along the board, telling everyone: "watch your own initials."

Fara watched. Each second it seemed to him that he couldn't stand it an instant longer. He wanted to scream at the roomful of men to be silent. He wanted to jump up to pace the floor, but others who did that were yelled at hysterically. Abruptly, the blind savagery of it scared Fara. He thought unsteadily: "I'm not going to make a fool of myself. I..."

"Clark, Fara..." winked the board. "Clark, Fara..."

With a shout, Fara leaped to his feet. "That's me!" he shrieked. "Me!"

No one turned. No one paid the slightest attention. Shamed, he slunk across the room where an endless line of men kept crowding into a corridor beyond. The silence in the long corridor was almost as shattering as the noise it replaced. It was hard to concentrate on the idea of a number, 474. It was completely impossible to imagine what could lie beyond, 474.

The room was small. It was furnished with a small, business-type table and two chairs. On the table were seven neat piles of folders, each pile a different color. The piles were arranged in a row in front of a large, milky-white globe, that began to glow with a soft light. Out of its depths, a man's baritone voice said:

"Fara Clark?"

"Yes," said Fara.

“Before the verdict is rendered in your case,” the voice went on quietly, “I want you to take a folder from the blue pile. The list will show the Fifth Interplanetary Bank in its proper relation to yourself and the world, and it will be explained to you in due course.”

The list, Fara saw, was simply a list of the names of companies. The names ran from A to Z, and there were about five hundred of them. The folder carried no explanation; and Fara slipped it automatically into his side pocket, as the voice came again from the shining globe.

“It has been established,” the words came precisely, “that the Fifth Interplanetary Bank perpetrated upon you a gross swindle, and that it is further guilty of practicing scavengery, deception, blackmail and was accessory in a criminal conspiracy. The bank made contact with your son, Cayle, through what is quite properly known as a scavenger, that is, an agent whose job it is to find young men and women who are in financial difficulties but who have parents with money. The scavenger obtains for this service a commission of eight percent, which is always paid by the borrower, in this case, your son. The bank practiced deception in that its authorized agents deceived you by claiming that it had already paid out ten thousand credits to your son, whereas only one thousand credits was paid over and that not until your signature had been obtained. The blackmail guilt arises out of the threat to have your son arrested for falsely obtaining a loan, a threat made at a time when no money had exchanged hands. The conspiracy consists of the action whereby your note was promptly turned over to your competitor. The bank is accordingly triple-fined thirty-six thousand three hundred credits. It is not in our interest Fara Clark, for you to know how this money is obtained. Suffice to know that the bank pays it,

and that of the fine the weapon shops allocate to their own treasury a total of one half. The other half..."

There was a plop; a neatly packaged pile of bills fell onto the table. "For you," said the voice. Fara, with trembling fingers, slipped the package into his coat pocket. It required the purest mental and physical effort for him to concentrate on the next words that came.

"You must not assume that your troubles are over. The re-establishment of your motor repair shop in Glay will require force and courage. Be discreet, brave and determined, and you cannot fail. Do not hesitate to use the gun you have purchased in defense of your rights. The plan will be explained to you. And now, proceed through the door facing you."

Fara braced himself with an effort, opened the door and walked through. It was a dim, familiar room that he stepped into, and there was a silver-haired, fine-faced man who rose from a reading chair, and came forward in the dimness, smiling gravely.

The stupendous, fantastic, exhilarating adventure was over. He was back in the weapon shop of Glay.

Chapter XIX

He couldn't get over the wonder of it. This great and fascinating organization established here in the very heart of a ruthless civilization, a civilization that had in a few brief weeks stripped him of everything he possessed. With a deliberate will, he stopped that glowing flow of thought. A frown wrinkled his solidly built face; he said:

"The... judge..." Fara hesitated over the name, frowned again in annoyance with himself, then went on: "The judge said that to re-establish myself I would have to."

"Before we go into that," said the old man, "I want you to examine the blue folder you brought with you."

"Folder?" Fara echoed blankly. It took him a long moment to remember that he had picked up a folder from the table in Room 474

He studied the list of company names with a gathering puzzlement, noting that the name Automatic Atomic Motor Repair Shops was well down among the A's, and the Fifth Interplanetary Bank only one of several great banks included. Fara looked up finally:

"I don't understand/' he said. "Are these the companies you have had to act against?"

The silver-haired man smiled grimly, shook his head. "That is not what I mean. These firms constitute only a fraction of the eight million companies that are constantly in our books." He smiled again, humorlessly: "These companies all know that, because of us, their profits on paper bear

no' relation to their assets. What they don't know is what the difference really is, and, as we want a general improvement in business morals, not merely more skillful scheming to outwit us, we prefer them to remain in ignorance."

He paused, and this time he gave Fara a searching look, said at last: "The unique feature of the companies on this particular list is that they are every one wholly owned by Empress Isher." He finished swiftly: "In view of your past opinions on that subject, I do not expect you to believe me."

Lara stood quite still. He did believe it, with unquestioning conviction, completely, finally. The amazing, the unforgivable thing was that all his life he had watched the march of ruined men into the oblivion of poverty and disgrace, and blamed them .

Fara groaned. "I've been like a madman," he said. "Everything the empress and her officials did was right. No friendship, no personal relationship could survive with me that did not include belief in things as they were. I suppose if I started to talk against the empress I would receive equally short shrift."

"Under no circumstances," said the old man, "must you say anything against her majesty. The weapon shops will not countenance any such words, and will give no further aid to anyone who is so indiscreet. The empress is personally not as responsible as might appear. Like you, she is, to some extent, adrift on the tide of our civilization. But I will not enlarge upon our policy. The worst period of our relations with the Imperial power was reached some forty years ago when every person who was discovered receiving aid from us was murdered in some fashion. You may be surprised to learn that your father-in-law was among those assassinated at that time."

“Creel’s father!” gasped Fara. “But.” He stopped. There was such a rush of blood to his head that for a moment he could hardly see. “But,” he managed at last, “it was reported that he ran away with another woman.”

“They always spread a story of some kind,” the old man said; and Fara was silent.

The other went on: “We finally put a stop to their murders by killing the three men from the top down, excluding the royal family, who gave the order for the particular execution involved. But we do not again want that kind of bloody murder. Nor are we interested in any criticism of our toleration of so much that is evil. It is important to understand that we do not interfere in the main stream of human existence. We right wrongs; we act as a barrier between the people and their more ruthless exploiters. Generally speaking, we help only honest men; that is not to say that we do not give assistance to the less scrupulous, but only to the extent of selling them guns, which is a very great aid indeed, and which is one of the reasons why the government is relying almost exclusively for its power on an economic chicanery.

“In the four thousand years since the brilliant genius, Walter S. de Lany invented the vibration process that made the weapon shops possible, and laid down the first principles of weapon shop political philosophy, we have watched the tide of government swing backward and forward between democracy under a limited monarchy to complete tyranny. And we have discovered one thing: People always have the kind of government they want. When they want change, they must change it. As always we shall remain an incorruptible core, and I mean that literally; we have a psychological machine that never lies about a man’s character, I repeat, an incorruptible core of human

idealism, devoted to relieving the ills that arise inevitably under any form of government.

“But now, your problem. It is very simple, really. You must fight, as all men have fought since the beginning of time for what they valued, for their just rights. As you know, the Automatic Atomic Repair people removed all your machinery and tools within an hour of foreclosing on your shop. This material was taken to Ferd, and then shipped to a great warehouse on the coast. We recovered it, and with our special means of transportation have now replaced the machines in your shop. You will accordingly go there and.”

Fara listened with a gathering grimness to the instructions, nodded finally, his jaw clamped tight.

“You can count on me,” he said curtly. “I’ve been a stubborn man in my time; and though I’ve changed sides, I haven’t changed that.”

Chapter XX

Most of the houses were known to the police. But there was an unwritten law in connection with them. When a raid was due to take place the owner was warned. But the names of the men who had been imprisoned on the premises must be discoverable in some easily accessible desk drawer. During the next few days a checkup would be made of passenger lists recording the names of indigents and criminals being sent to Mars, Venus, and the various moons. Government contractors were insatiably in need of men for work on other planets. And the houses, frequented as they were by wealthy women who could not afford scandals, supplied a constant trickle of labor with no questions asked.

In their dealings with the houses the police objected only to the idea that dead men tell no tales. Proprietors found themselves mercilessly haled into court when they broke that one unalterable rule. After thousands of years, it had proved an effective method of keeping vice operating within the important limit, that the victim survived his grim experience.

Cayle stepped off the gangplank onto the soil of Mars.

And stopped. It was an involuntary reaction. The ground was as hard as rock. The chill of it penetrated the soles of his shoes and somehow pierced the marrow of his being. With ice-cold eyes he surveyed the bleak town of Shardl. And this tune a thought came, a hatred so violent that he shuddered. A determination so strong that he could feel the ice within him turning to steel.

“Get a move on you.” A stick prodded his shoulders One of the soldiers directing the disembarkation of the long line of sullen men bawled the words, his voice sounding strangely hollow in that rarefied air.

Cayle did not even turn around. He moved, that was his reaction to the insult and indignity. He walked along, keeping his place in the line; and with every step he took the chill off the ground penetrated more deeply into his lungs. Ahead of him other men felt the constriction. They began to run. Still others broke past him, breathing hoarsely, the whites of their eyes showing, their bodies clumsily responding to the lesser gravity. The ground was rough and uneven and those who fell cried out as the jagged edges tore at them. Human blood stained the iron-hard soil of ever-frozen Mars.

Cayle walked on, unheeding, contemptuous of those who had lost their heads. They had been warned against the gravity. And the great enclosed plastic compound was only a quarter of a mile away, the intervening cold shocking but bearable. He reached the compound, his flesh tingling, his feet numbed. It was warm inside and he made his way slowly to the side of the building from which the main section of the town was visible.

Shardl was a mining town. It stood on a flat plain that was just beginning to blossom here and there with the green of warm atomic gardens. The shrubbery, spotty and incongruous, only emphasized the near desolation of every visible horizon.

He saw that men were studying bulletin boards over against one wall. He moved closer, and read what he could see of one sign. It read:

OPPORTUNITY

Cayle pressed up to it and read the rest of the words, then smiled and turned away. So they wanted people to sign up for Martian farms. Agree to remain fifteen years and "Her Gracious Majesty, Innelda of Isher, will supply you with a completely equipped atomic-heated farm. No down payment, forty years to pay."

The offer concluded insinuatingly: "Go immediately to the Lands office, sign your application, and you will not have to do one minute's work in the mines."

Cayle was immune to the appeal. He had heard of this system of colonizing the cold planet of Mars and the hot planet of Venus. Eventually every acre of soil would be occupied, and the planet subjected to the beneficial influence of atomic power. And so, over the millennia, men would at last thaw all the icy habitable worlds of the Solar System and chill the burning deserts of Venus and Mercury. Men working out their lives on the drabber spawnings of their sun would create reasonable facsimiles of the far green Earth from which they had come.

That was the theory. In all those lazy days at public school, when he had read and listened to the accounts of colonization, he had not dreamed that he would one day be standing here, looking out at the half-light world of Mars, standing here, caught by a process too ruthless for any man, raised as he had been raised, to resist. He had no hatred now of his father. That was gone out of him into the hazy mists of the past, into that world of nothingness where his illusions had gone. The poor dumb fool, that was his thought now. Perhaps it was just as well some people never did comprehend the realities of life in the empire of Isher.

His own personal problem was solved in a simple, effective manner. He had been afraid. Now he wasn't. He had, astonishingly enough, been honest. Now, he wasn't. Well, in a way, he wasn't. It all depended on an individual's outlook on life as to how far he'd accept the theory that a human being must be strong enough to face the necessities of his era. Cayle Clark intended to face them all the way. Not for long would such a man as he had become remain on Mars. Meanwhile, he must sign nothing that would restrict his movements. He must be cautious, but seize opportunities instantly on an all-out basis.

Behind him a voice said slyly, "Am I addressing Cayle Clark, formerly of the village of Glay?"

Cayle turned slowly. He hadn't expected opportunity to come so quickly. The man who stood before him was small. He wore an overcoat of expensive material and he was very obviously not a person who had come on the boat, in spite of his shriveled and insignificant appearance. He spoke again.

"I am the local... uh... representative of the Fifth Bank. It may be that we can help you out of this unusual situation."

He looked like a toad, his gaunt face enframed in a high collar. His eyes, like black seeds, peered forth with a dull but avaricious light.

Cayle shrank involuntarily, not from fear but from loathing. There had been a woman who came to the house, a woman bedecked with jewels and furs, with a face like that and eyes like that. And all the whips they had used on his bare back while she looked on with greedy eyes had not broken his will to have nothing to do with her. It cost Cayle an effort

of mind to realize that he must not necessarily compare the two people or believe that they had anything in common.

"Interested?" asked the creature.

Cayle started to nod. And then a word that hadn't really penetrated before came through to his consciousness.

"What bank did you say?"

The human caricature smiled with the look of a man who realized he was bearing precious gifts. "The Fifth Bank," he said. "You made a deposit in our central at Imperial City about a month ago. In the course of a normal investigation of the background of any new depositor we discovered that you were on your way to Mars under unpleasant circumstances. We therefore wish to place our loan department at your service."

"I see," said Cayle carefully.

His eyes, sharp and alert, made another more detailed examination of this agent of the great bank. But there was nothing new, nothing to inspire confidence. And yet he did not think of ending the conversation. "Just what would the bank do for me?" he asked quietly.

The man cleared his throat. "You are the son of Fara and Creel Clark?" he asked pompously.

Caylo admitted the relationship after a moment's hesitation.

"You desire to return to Earth?"

There was no hesitation about his answer to that. "Yes," he said.

"The base fare," said the man, "is six hundred credits for the trip when the distance between Mars and Earth permits a twenty-four day journey. When the distance is greater the cost is 10 credits a day extra. You probably knew that."

Cayle hadn't known. But he had guessed that the mine head wage of 25 credits a week would not provide a quick means of returning to Earth. He felt tensed, conscious of how completely a man without resources could be confined to a planet He had an idea of what was coming.

"The Fifth Bank," said the man in a grand tone, "will loan you the sum of one thousand credits if your father will guarantee the debt and if you will sign a note agreeing to pay back ten thousand credits."

Cayle sat down heavily. The end of hope had come more swiftly than he had expected. "My father," he said wearily, "would never guarantee a note for ten thousand credits."

"Your father," said the agent, "will be asked to guarantee only the one thousand. You will be expected to pay ten thousand out of your future earnings."

Cayle studied him with narrowed eyes. "By what method will this money be paid over to me?"

The gaunt face smiled. "You sign, then we give it to you. And just leave your father to us. The bank has a psychology department for handling co-signers and signers of notes. On some we use the dominating technique, on others."

Cayle interrupted. "So far as I am concerned the money has to be paid over to me before I sign."

The other shrugged, and laughed. "As you will. I see you are a sharp dealer. Come over to the mine manager's office."

He walked off, Cayle following thoughtfully. It was too easy and he didn't like it. Everything was happening too swiftly, as if, well, as if this were part of the routine of the end of a voyage. He slowed and looked around alertly. There was a long line of offices, he saw, where other men were being taken by well-dressed individuals.

It seemed to him that he could visualize the picture then. The first offer on the bulletin board. Volunteer to go on a farm. If they didn't get you that way, then along came a smooth tongued man to offer a loan on the basis of your family credit. The loan money would either not be advanced at all or it would be stolen from you almost immediately afterwards.

Thereupon, having exhausted all your available resources, present and future, you were on Mars to stay.

"There'll be a couple of witnesses," Clark thought. "Big fellows with guns on them to make sure that you don't get your money."

It was a good way to colonize an unfriendly planet, possibly the only way, considering that human beings were not too interested any more in pioneering.

He walked into the office. And there were the two men, well-dressed, smiling, friendly. They were introduced as, respectively, the mine manager and a clerk from the bank. Clark wondered cynically how many other persons, shanghaied as he had been, were being introduced at this moment to the "mine manager." It sounded very impressive and it must be thrilling to have a chance to talk in heart to heart fashion with so important a personage, to realize that he was human after all. Cayle shook hands with him and then turned to look the situation over. The important thing

was to get the money legally. That meant actually signing the document and getting a copy. Even that might not mean anything but, after all, there was a certain amount of law on the planets. The dangerous thing was to be without money and to arrive in court where other men could blandly deny one's story.

The room was not large but it was luxuriously furnished. It could have been a mine manager's office. There were two doors, the one through which he had come, and one directly opposite, where, presumably, the robbed individual made his exit without getting any chance to talk to people in the big room from which he had come. Clark walked over to the second door, opened it and saw that it led outside. There were scores of huts within sight and, standing in groups all around, were soldiers. The sight of them gave him pause, for obviously they would make it impossible for him to make a run for it if he succeeded in obtaining the money.

He used his body to block off the mob. With swift fingers he tested to see if it were locked from the outside. It was. Quietly, he closed the door, and, with a smile, turned back into the room. He shivered convincingly. "Sure chilly out there. I'll be glad to get back to Earth."

The three men smiled sympathetically and the reptilian bank agent held out a document with ten one-hundred credit notes clipped to it. Clark counted the money and put it in his pocket. Then he read the contract. It was quite simple, apparently designed to ease the minds of people who were suspicious of involved forms. There were three copies, one to be sent to Earth, one for the Martian branch and one for him. They were properly signed and sealed and awaited only his signature. Clark tore off the bottom one and put it into his pocket. The others were inserted into the registered circuit. He signed the first one with a flourish,

and then he stepped back and threw the pen, point first, into the face of the "manager."

The man screamed and put his hand up to his tom cheek.

That was all Clark saw. With a jump he reached the side of the toadlike man, grabbed at his neck just above the heavy coat collar and squeezed with all his strength. The creature yelped and struggled weakly.

For a moment then, Clark had the sharp fear that his plan for attack had been falsely based. He had assumed that the other had a gun also and would reach for it in panic. Long skinny fingers were clawing inside the voluminous coat. They came out clutching a little glittering blaster that Clark snatched, hand and all, and crushed into his own palm. Simultaneously, he squeezed the weapon away from the other's grasp.

He saw that the big "clerk" had his gun out, and was edging around, trying to get a chance to use it without harming the reptile. Clark took a snap shot at the man's foot. The radiant flame made a thin, bright beam. There was an odor of burning leather and a streamer of blue smoke. With a cry, the fellow dropped his weapon and sat down heavily on the floor. He writhed there, clutching at his foot. At Clark's urging, the "manager" held up his hands reluctantly. Swiftly, Clark relieved him of his blaster, picked up the one on the floor and backed toward the door.

He explained his plan briefly. The toad would accompany him as a hostage. They would go to the nearest airline base and fly to the city of Mare Cimmerium, at which point he would catch a regular liner from Earth. "And if anything should go wrong," Cayle Clark concluded, "at least one person will die before I do."

Nothing went wrong.

And that day was August 26th, 4784 Isher, two months and twenty-three days after Imperial Innelda launched her attack on the weapon makers.

Chapter XXI

Cayle Clark planned and schemed, the days of the journey from Mars to Earth wound their clockwise course. The ship time switched gradually from Cimme-rium Daylight Time to Imperial City Time. But the night outside, with its flashingly bright sun off to one side and everywhere else starry darkness, was an unchanging environment. Meals were eaten. Clark slept and dreamed and moved and had his being. His thoughts grew more direct, more determined. He had no doubts. A man who had put away fear of death could not fail.

The sun grew brighter. It splashed spiral-like across the darkness. Mars receded to a point of smallness, a reddish dot in a sea of night, hard to find among the starry brilliants of the jewel-case sky. Gradually Earth became a large, shining ball of light, then a monstrous, misty, unbelievable thing that filled half the sky. The continents showed through. And on Earth's nightside, partly visible as the ship swung past the moon, the cities shone with intermittent glitter that rivaled the heavens themselves.

Clark saw that vision of Earth in snatches only. Five days from destination he had discovered a stud poker game in one of the holds. From the beginning he lost. Not every game, an occasional win helped him recuperate a few credits. But by the third day of the endless game, the second last of the trip, the direction of his fortune was so marked that he took alarm and quit.

In his cabin he counted the money that remained to him, eighty-one credits. He had paid eight percent commission on the thousand credits to the representative of the bank.

The rest had gone on fare, poker losses and one Imperial-style gun. "At least," Clark thought, "I'll soon be back in Imperial City. And with more money than when I arrived last time."

He lay back, amazingly at ease. The poker losses did not disturb him. He hadn't, when he came right down to it, planned to try gambling again. He had a different picture of his life. He would take risks, of course, but on a higher level. He had won five hundred thousand credits, at least, in the Penny Palace. It would be difficult to collect it but he would succeed. He felt himself patient and capable, ready for all eventualities.

As soon as he had the money he would secure a commission from Colonel Medlon. He might pay for it and he might not. It depended upon the moment. There was no vengefulness in his plan. He didn't care what happened to two venal creatures like Fatty and the colonel. They were stepping stones, it seemed to Clark, in the most ambitious scheme that had ever been planned in the Empire of Isher. A scheme rooted in a fact that seemed to have escaped all the creature-men who had risen to positions of rank in the Imperial Service.

Innelda of Isher meant well by the country. In his one contact with her he had sensed a personality frustrated by the corruption of others. In spite of the talk against her, the empress was honest, on a Machiavellian level, of course. Clark did not doubt that she could issue an order of execution. But that was part of her function as a ruler. Like himself, she must rise to the necessities of her situation.

The empress was honest. She would welcome a man who would use her limitless authority to clean house for her. For two and a half months now he had been thinking over what

she had said that day in Medlon's* office and he had some pretty shrewd answers. There was her reference to officer-prospects staying away in droves because they had heard something was up. And her accusation of a pro-weapon shop conspiracy tied in with the inexplicable closing of the shops. Something was up and, for a man who had made a personal contact, it spelled massive opportunity.

To all his planned actions Clark made but one qualification. First, he must seek out Lucy Rail and ask her to marry him.

That hunger would not wait.

The ship came down into its cradle a few minutes before noon on a cloudless day. There were formalities and it was two o'clock before Clark's papers were stamped and he emerged into the open. A breeze touched his cheeks and, from the peak of metal that was the landing field, he could see the dazzling city to the west.

It was a view to make a man catch his breath, but Clark did not waste any time. From a 'stat booth, he called Lucy's number. A pause, then a young man's face came onto the screen. "I'm Lucy's husband," he said. "She went out for a minute, but you don't want to talk to her." Persuasively. "Take a good look at me and you'll agree."

Clark stared blankly. But the familiarity of the other's face would not penetrate through the shock of the words he had spoken.

"Look hard," the image in the 'stat urged.

Clark began, "I don't think that."

And then he got it. He drew back like a man whose face had been slapped. He put out his hand as if he would * defend

his eyes from a vision that was too bright for them. He could feel the blood draining from his cheeks, and he swayed. The now familiar voice drew him back to normalcy.

“Pull yourself together!” it said. “And listen. I want you to meet me tomorrow night on the beach of the Haberdashery Paradise. Take one more look at me, convince yourself, and be there.”

Clark didn’t need the look but his eyes sought the image face. And there was no question. The face that was staring at him from the ‘stat was his own.

Cayle Clark was looking at Cayle Clark, at 2:10 p.m., October 4, 4784 Isher.

Chapter XXII

October 6th, The empress stirred, and turned over in bed. She had a memory. The night before she had told herself that by morning her mind would be made up. As she came out of sleep she realized the uncertainty was still there. She opened her eyes, already embittered against the day.

She sat up, composing the tension in her face. And as she did so half a dozen maids, who had been hovering behind a sound-proofed screen, dashed forward. An energy drink was tendered. Sunlight adjustments were made, the great bedroom brightened for another morning. Massage, shower, facial, hair, and, again and again, as the routine proceeded, she thought. "I have got to get action or the attack will end in a personal humiliation. Surely, after four months, they cannot keep on delaying."

As soon as she had her dress on she began to receive palace officials. First, Gerritt, the chief of Palace Administration. He had a problem, many of them, and as usual, annoying ones. That was partially her own fault. Long ago she had insisted that all punishment of the palace staff be referred to her. Today the predominant motif was insolence. Servants defying their superiors and shirking their work. The offense was becoming common.

"For heaven's sake," Innelda said irritably, "if they don't like the limitations of their positions, why don't they quit? Palace trained servants can always obtain positions, if only for what they are believed to know about my private life."

"Why doesn't your Majesty let me handle these personal matters?" said Gerritt. It was his stock remark, stolidly

made. She knew that eventually he would wear her down but not to his own benefit. No stubborn old conservative was going to have full control of the huge staff of palace servitors. A heritage from the regency period, he and all his kind were going to be asked to vacate. She sighed, and dismissed him, and was back with her problem. What to do? Should she order attacks wherever possible? Or wait in the hope that new information would turn up? The trouble was that she had been waiting now for so many weeks.

General Doocar came in, a tall, thin man with slate gray eyes. He saluted with an angular motion and said, "Madam, the building reappeared for two hours and forty minutes last night, only one minute from the estimated time."

Innelda nodded. That was routine now. The pattern of reappearance had been established within a week of the first disappearance. She still insisted on being kept informed of the building's movements, just why, she couldn't decide.

"I'm like a child," she thought self-critically. "I can't let anything get out of my control." The analysis darkened her mood. She made a few sharp remarks about the efficiency of the military scientists under his command, then asked the question. The general shook his head.

"Madam," he said, "an attack is out of the question at the moment. We have a power machine dominating the weapon shops in every large city on this planet. But during the past two and a half months eleven thousand officers have deserted. The power machines are manned by guards who do not know how to operate them."

The woman flashed. "The hypnotic machine could teach them en masse in one hour."

"Yes." The hard voice did not change. The thin lips became a little thinner. That was all. "Your Majesty, if we are prepared to hand such information over to common soldiers, that is your privilege. You have but to command and I will obey."

Innelda bit her lip, vexed. This grim old man had her there. It was annoying to have come out at last with a thought that she had restrained so often in the past. She said defensively, "It seems that the so-called common soldiers are more loyal than my commissioned officers, and braver."

He shrugged. "You allow these tax creatures of yours the privilege of selling commissions," he said. "You do, generally, get educated people that way, but you surely don't expect a man who has paid ten thousand credits for a captaincy to take the chance of getting himself killed."

The argument began to weary her. She had heard it all before in different words. The same old meanings, reinforced by the same dramatizations, though it was some weeks now since the problem of commissions in the armed forces had been mentioned. The subject was not a pleasant one. It reminded her now of something she had almost forgotten. "The last time we talked of this," she said slowly, "I requested you to contact Colonel Medlon and ask him whatever became of that officer he was about to commission when I called him one day? It isn't often that I make personal contacts with lower ranks." Suddenly she became savage. "I'm hedged in here by a brigade of old men who don't know how to mobilize an army." She fought down her anger. "But never mind that. What about him?" General Doocar said stonily, "Colonel Medlon informs me that the young officer-prospect did not return at the appointed hour. The colonel assumes that he must have got wind of what was up and hastily changed his mind."

There was silence. She found herself thinking, that the explanation sounded wrong. He wasn't like that. And besides the empress personally had talked to him.

She did not underestimate the power of such personal contact. People who met the Empress of Isher felt not only her personal charm but experienced the abnormal aura of her position. The combination was overpowering, not to be lightly dismissed on the word of a suspected "wino."

She spoke at last with a quiet determination. "General, inform the colonel today that he will either produce this young officer or face a Lambeth in the morning."

The gaunt man bowed but there was a cynical smile on his face. "Madam," he said, "if it gives you pleasure to destroy corruption, one individual at a time, you have a lifelong task ahead of you."

She didn't like that. There was a brutality in the remark that reached deep into her. She drew back. "I've got to start somewhere." She made a gesture, half threat, half frustration. She said querulously, "I don't understand you anymore, General. When I was younger you used to agree that something ought to be done."

"Not by you." He shook his head. "The Imperial family must sanction, not personally direct, a moral housecleaning." He shrugged. "As a matter of fact, I have more or less come around to the weapon shop idea that this is an age where people take to corruption whenever their adventurous instincts are denied normal expression."

The green, imperial eyes hashed. "I am not interested in weapon shop philosophy."

She was abruptly astounded that he should have mentioned the weapon shops in such a fashion. She flung the accusation at him. The grand old man was immune.

"Madam," he said, "when I stop examining the ideas and philosophies of a power that has now existed for three thousand seven hundred years you may have my resignation."

The woman rejected the argument. Everywhere she turned was this semi-worship of the weapon shops. More, it was an acceptance of the shops as a legitimate facet of Isher civilization. "I must get rid of these old men," she thought, not for the first time. "They treat me as a child and will always treat me that way." Aloud she said icily, "General, I am not interested in hearing the moral teachings of an organization that at base is responsible for all the immorality in the Solar System. We live in an age where productive capacity is so great that no one need ever starve. Crime, because of economic need does not exist. The problem of psychiatric crime can be solved whenever we get hold of the afflicted person. But what is the situation?" She was hot now with remembered rage. "We discover that our psychopath has been sold a weapon shop gun. The owner of a House of Illusion is similarly protected. True, in that case there is an understanding between the police and the houses whereby raids are allowed. But if any individual owner should decide to resist, we would have to bring a thirty-thousand-cycle cannon to defeat him." She paused to survey the job done by her hairdresser, felt satisfied, waved the woman away.

"Ridiculous and criminal!" she continued. "On every side, we are frustrated in our desire to end this eternal wickedness of millions of individuals, who sneer at the law because they have weapon shop guns. It would be different,

if these, gun makers, would limit the sale of their products to respectable people. But when any sort of scoundrel can buy one."

"A defensive gun!" interjected the general softly. "Defensive only."

"Exactly," said Xnnelda. "A man can commit any crime, then defend himself against justice. Oh." furiously. "why do I even talk to you? General, I'm telling you. We have the weapon that can destroy these weapon shops once and for all. You don't have to kill the members, but get the army organized to destroy the shops. Get it organized, I say, for an attack within three days? A week?" She looked at him. "How long, General?"

He pleaded, "Give me until the new year, Madam. I swear that the confusion which was caused by the desertions had temporarily ruined us."

She had forgotten the deserters for the moment. "You have captured some of these officers?"

He hesitated. "Some, yes."

"I want one available for questioning this morning."

General Doocar bowed.

"As for the rest," said Xnnelda, "keep the military police after them. As soon as this mess is over, I'll set up special court martial and we'll teach these traitors the meaning of their oaths of allegiance."

"Suppose," said Doocar, and his voice was soft again, "they have weapon shop guns?"

Her reaction to that was so violent that she grew calm in her anger. "My friend," she said gravely, "when army discipline can be set at nought by an underground organization, then even the generals must realize it is time to destroy the subversion." She made a motion with her right arm. A gesture of decisiveness. "This afternoon, General, I shall visit the laboratories of Olympian Field. I want to see what progress has been made in finding out just what the weapon makers did to that building.

Tomorrow morning, at least, Colonel Medlon must procure for me the young man he was supposed to have commissioned. If he cannot do it, one corrupt head will roll. You may think I'm being childish, concerning myself with one individual. But I must start somewhere. And that young man I know about. Him I can check on. But now," she said, "you weapon shop admirer, get out of here before I do something drastic."

"Madam," protested Doocar mildly. "I am loyal to the House of Isher."

"I am glad to hear it," said Innelda scathingly.

She brushed past him and went out into the hallway without looking back.

Chapter XXIII

AS SHE ENTERED THE SALON, SHE HEARD THE FAINT SIGH-ing of relief of those already there. She smiled darkly. People who wanted to eat in the Imperial salon had to wait till she broke bread or sent word she wasn't coming. No compulsion existed for anyone to be present. But usually those who had access did not deny themselves the privilege. Innelda said, "Good morning!" Then sat down at the head of her table. She sipped a glass of water, which was the signal for the waiters to come in. After she had given her order, she looked around the room. Everywhere were graying heads; men and women over fifty; relics of the regency. A half dozen young men and two of her younger secretaries sat at her own table. But they were a remnant; the residue of the emigration of young people that had followed the departure of Prince del Curtin.

"Did everybody have a nice sleep last night?" Innelda broke the silence sweetly. They hastened to assure her that they had. "How nice," she murmured, and settled into a moody silence. She wasn't sure just what she wanted of her companions. Lightness, perhaps. But how much? A year before; a newly introduced young man had asked her if she were still a virgin. And since she was, the incident still annoyed her.

Crudeness was definitely out of order. She had an instinctive feeling that immorality on her part would reflect on the reputation of the Isher family. But then what? She pecked at a piece of toast. What did she want? A positive approach, a belief in principles, with an ability to see the humorous side of life. Her own upbringing, severe and simple, had stressed the positive mind trainings. Very

important, but seriousness could be overdone. She stiffened with an old determination. "I've got to get rid of these humorless, do-nothing, let's-be-careful-and-not-rock-the-boat, think-twice-and-stop." She paused, self-pityingly, and prayed to her private gods, "Give me one good joke a day to make me laugh and one man who can handle affairs of state and, in addition, know how to amuse me. If only Del were here."

She scowled in annoyance at the direction her thoughts were taking. Her cousin, Prince del Curtin, disapproved of the attack-on the weapon shops. What a shock, when she had first discovered that. And what mortification when all the young men of his clique left the palace with him, refusing to participate in the adventure. Having killed Banton Vickers for threatening to inform the weapon shops of her plans, a treasonous utterance that would have destroyed her prestige if she had let it pass, she could not overlook the opposition. Tight-lipped, she recalled their final conversation, the prince, cold and formal, marvelously good-looking in his anger, herself uncertain but determined, as he said, "When you get over this madness, Innelda, you may call me back." He must have known that it was an opportunity for her to say, "That will be. never." But she hadn't dared to say it. She had been like a wife, she thought bitterly. Wronged but unwilling to say too much, for fear that her husband might take her at her word. Not that she could ever marry the prince after such an action on his part. Still it would be nice to have him back, later after the weapon shops were destroyed. She finished breakfast and glanced at her watch. Nine thirty. She cringed, involuntarily. The long day was barely begun.

At half past ten, free of urgent correspondence, she had the officer-deserter brought in. He was a man of thirty-three according to his file, country born and holding the rank of

major. He came in; a faint cynical smile on his lips, but his eyes looked depressed. His name was Gile Sanders. Innelda studied him gloomily. According to his file he had three mistresses and had made a fortune out of a peculiar graft involving Army purchases. It was a fairly typical case history. And the part that was difficult to understand was why he, who had so much, had given it all up. She asked the question earnestly. "And please," she said, "do not insult me by suggesting that you were concerned with the moral issue of the war. Tell me simply and plainly why you gave up all your possessions for dishonor and disgrace. In one act you disinherited yourself. The very least that can happen to you is that you'll be sent to Mars or Venus permanently. Were you a fool or a coward or both?"

He shrugged. "I suppose I was a fool. His feet fumbled nervously over the floor. His eyes did not evade her direct stare, but his answer left her dissatisfied. After ten minutes she had got no real explanation out of him. It was possible that the profit and loss motivation had not influenced his decision. She tried a new approach. According to your file," she said, "you were notified to report to building eight hundred A and, because of your rank, it was explained to you that at last a method had been found to destroy the weapon shops. An hour later, after having burned your private papers, you left your office and took up residence in a seaside cottage which you had purchased secretly, you thought-five years ago. A week later, when it was clear that you did not intend to do your duty, you were arrested. You have been in close confinement ever since. Is that picture fairly correct?"

The man nodded but said nothing. The empress studied him, biting her lips. "My friend," she said softly at last, "I have it in my power to make your punishment anything I

desire. Anything. Death, banishment, commutation." she hesitated. "reinstatement."

Major Sanders sighed wearily. "I know," he said. That was the picture I suddenly saw."

"I don't understand." She was puzzled. If you realize the potentialities of your act, then you were very foolish.

"The picture," he said in a monotone, as if he had not heard her interruption, "of a time when someone, not necessarily yourself, would have that power without qualification, without there being anywhere to turn, without alleviation, without, hope."

She had her answer. "Well, of all the stupidity!" said Innelda explosively. She leaned back in her chair, momentarily overcome, drew a deep breath, then shook her head in irritation. "Major," she said gently, "I feel sorry for you. Surely your knowledge of the history of my family must have told you that the danger of misuse of power does not exist. The world is too big. As an individual I can interfere in the affairs of such a tiny proportion of the human race that it is ridiculous. Every decree that I issue vanishes into a positive blur of conflicting interpretations as it recedes from me. That decree could be ultimately mild, it would make no difference in the final administration of it. Anything, when applied to eleven billion people, takes on a meaningless quality that is impossible to imagine unless you have studied, as I have, actual results."

She saw with astonishment that her words had not touched him. She drew back, offended. It was all so crystal clear and here was one more obstinate fool. She restrained her anger with an effort. "Major," she said, with the weapon shops out of the way we could introduce steady laws that could not

be flouted. There would be more uniform administration of justice because people would have to accept the judgment of the courts, their only recourse being appeals to the higher courts."

"Exactly," said Sanders. That was all. His tone rejected her logic. She studied him for a long moment, all the sympathy gone from her. Then she said bitterly, "If you're such a firm believer in the weapon shops, why didn't you protect yourself by going to them for a defensive gun?"

"I did."

She hesitated; then asked coldly, "What was the matter. Did your courage fail you when it came to the point of using it to defend yourself from arrest?"

Watching him, she knew she shouldn't have said that. It left her open to a retort which, she realized, might be devastating. Her fear was justified.

Sanders said, "No, Your Majesty. I did exactly what some of the other, uh, deserters did. I took off my uniform and went to a weapon shop, intending to buy a gun. But the door wouldn't open. It appears that I am one of the few officers who believe that the Isher family is the more important of the two facets of Isher civilization."

His eyes had been bright as he spoke. Now they grew depressed again. "I am," he said, "in exactly the position you want to put everybody into. I have no way to turn. I must accept your law; must accept secret declarations of war on an institution that is as much a part of Isher civilization as the House of Isher itself; must accept death if you decree it, without a chance to defend myself in open battle. Your Majesty," he finished quietly, "I respect and admire you. The officers who deserted are not scoundrels.

They were merely confronted with a choice and they chose not to participate in an attack on things as they are. I doubt if I could put it more honestly than that."

She doubted it too. Here was a man who would never understand the realistic necessity of what she was doing.

After she dismissed him she noted his name in her check-file, commenting that she wanted to hear the verdict of his court martial .The action of writing the words reminded her of her inability to remember the name of the man whom Colonel Medlon was to produce by morning. She leafed the pages, and found it immediately. "Cayle Clark," she said aloud. "That's he." She realized that it was now time to go to the Treasury Department and hear all the reasons why it was impossible to spend more money. With a tired smile, she went out of the study and took a private elevator up to the fiftieth floor.

Chapter XXIV

We were married (said Lucy in her disjointed re-port to the coordination department of the weapon shops) shortly before noon, Friday, the day he landed from Mars. I do not know how to account for the fact that a later check-up revealed he had not landed until 2 o'clock, nor have I confronted him with this information. I will ask him about it only if I am specifically requested to do so. I do not desire to guess how he was able to marry me before the hour of the ship's arrival. There is no question in my mind, however. The man I married is Cayle Clark. It is impossible that I have been fooled by somebody representing himself to be Cayle. He has just made his daily 'stat call to me, but he doesn't know that I am making this report. I'm beginning to feel that it is wrong for me to make any reports whatever about him. However, the general circumstances being what they are, I am as requested, trying to recall every detail of what happened. I will begin with the moment that I received a 'stat call from him on the morning of his arrival from Mars.

The time as I remember it was about half past ten. That conversation was extremely brief. We exchanged greetings, and then he asked me to marry him. My feelings about Cayle Clark are well known to the head of the Coordination Department. And I am sure Mr. Hedrock will not be surprised that I agreed instantly to the proposal, and that we signed our marriage declarations on the registered circuit a few minutes before noon the same morning. We then went to my apartment, where, with one interruption, we remained the rest of that day and that night. The interruption came at a quarter to two when he asked me if I

would take a walk around the block while he used my 'stat for a call. He didn't say whether the call would be incoming or out-going but, on returning, I noticed on the 'stat meter that it had been an incoming call.

I do not apologize for leaving the apartment at his request. My acquiescence seems to me, normal. During the course of the day and evening, he made no further reference to the call but instead described to me everything that had happened to him since I last saw him in the House of Illusion. I do confess that his account at times was not so clear as it might have been and he more than once gave me the impression that he was relating events which had happened to him a considerable time ago.

The morning after our marriage he was up early, and said that he had many things to do. Since I was anxious to call up Mr. Hedrock, I let him go without objection. The subsequent report of another weapon shop agent that a very expensive private carplane picked him up a block from the apartment and took off before the agent could summon transportation, puzzles me. Frankly, I cannot understand it.

Since then, Cayle has not been to the apartment but he has called me up every morning and told me that he cannot give me details as yet about what he is doing, but that he loves me as much as ever. I shall accept that until he himself tells me otherwise. I have no knowledge at all of the report that he has been for more than a month a captain in Her Majesty's army. I do not know how he managed to obtain a commission, nor by what means he is pushing his interests. If it is true, as reported, that he has already been attached to the personal staff of the empress, then, I can only express amazement and speculate privately as to how he has managed it.

In conclusion, let me affirm my faith in Cayle. I cannot account for his actions, but I believe that the end-result will be honorable.

(Signed) Lucy Rail Clark

November 14, 4784 I

Chapter XXV

Tms was it. For a month Hedrock had delayed his reaction, waiting for new evidence. But now, reading Lucy's document, the conviction came. The unexpected turn of events that he had been waiting for was happening. What it was he had no idea. He felt a tensed alarm, the fear that he was missing vital clues. But doubt he had none this was it.

Frowning, he reread the girl's statement. And it seemed to him then that Lucy was developing a negative attitude toward the weapon shops. It was not in what she had done but that she felt her actions might be misinterpreted. That was defensive, and therefore bad. The hold of the shops on its members was psychological. Usually, when anyone wanted to break away, he was divested of vital memories, given a bonus depending on length of service and shooed off with the blessings of the organization. But Lucy was a key contact during a great crisis. The conflict between her duty to the shops and her personal situation must not be allowed to become too disturbing.

Hedrock frowned over the problem, then dialed the 'stat. Lucy's face came onto the screen and Hedrock said earnestly, "I have just read your statement, Lucy, and I want to thank you for your cooperation. We appreciate your position thoroughly and I have been asked ' he worded it deliberately as if an executive group were behind what he was saying "I have been asked to request that you hold yourself ready for a call from us night and day until the critical period is over. In return, the weapon shops will do everything in their power to protect your husband from any dangerous reactions that may result from what he is doing."

It was no light promise. He had already handed the assignment over to the protective branch. Insofar as it was possible to protect a man in the Imperial sphere the job was being done. He watched Lucy's face casually but intently. Intelligent though she was, she would never fully comprehend the weapon shop-Isher war. It didn't show. No guns were firing. Nobody was being killed. And even if the weapon shops were destroyed Lucy would not immediately notice the difference. Her life might never be affected and not even the immortal man could say what the pattern of existence would be when one of the two power facets of the culture was eliminated. He saw that Lucy was not satisfied with what he had said. He hesitated, then, "Mrs. Clark, on the day you were married you took your husband's callidity measurements and gave them to us. We have never told you the integrated result because we did not want to alarm you. I think, however, that you will be interested rather than anxious.

"They're special?" Lucy asked.

"Special!" Hedrock searched for adjectives. "Your husband's callidity at the time you measured him was the highest that has ever been recorded in the history of the Information Center. The index has nothing to do with gambling and we cannot guess what form it will take but that it will affect the whole world of Isher we have no doubt."

With troubled eyes he gazed at her. The devastating aspect of the affair was that Cayle Clark was not doing anything. There he was, attached to the personal staff of the empress, his movements accounted for by a host of spies well, almost all his movements. Several 'stat calls he had made from the palace had proved too private for interference. And twice he had slipped away from the palace, and eluded his

shadows. Minor incidents they could scarcely account for the fact that, according to his callidetic measurement, what was happening was happening now. The great event, whatever it was, was taking place. And not even the No-men of the shops were able to guess what it was.

Hedrock explained the situation, then, "Lucy," he said, are sure you have held nothing back? I swear to you it is a matter of life and death, particularly his life."

The girl shook her head. And though he watched closely her eyes did not change, showed not a trace of myopia. They widened, but that was another phenomenon. Her mouth remained firm, which was a good sign. It was impossible to tell definitely, of course, just by looking at her physical reactions except that Lucy Rail was not known ever to have taken evasive training. Where Robert Hedrock could lie without giving one of the known lie-reactions, Lucy simply didn't have the experience or nerve-control training to stifle the unconscious signals of her muscles.

"Mr. Hedrock," she said, "you know that you can count on me to the limit."

That was a victory for his immediate purpose. But he broke the connection, dissatisfied, not with Lucy or with the other agents, but with himself. He was missing something. His mind was not seeing deep enough into reality. Just as the solution to the seesaw problem was eluding him, so now he was baffled by what must in reality be very apparent. Sitting here in his office, mulling over facts and figures, he was too far from the scene.

It was clearly time for an on-the-spot investigation by Robert Hedrock in person.

Chapter XXV

Hedrock walked slowly along the Avenue of Luck savoring the difference in its appearance. He couldn't recall just when he had last been on the street, but it seemed a long, long time ago. There were more establishments than he remembered, but not many changes otherwise. A hundred years did not affect the structural metals and material of a building made under the rigid Isher regulations. The general architectural designs remained the same. The decoration was different. New lighting facades, planned to attract the eye, confronted him in every direction. The science of refurbishing had not been neglected.

He entered the Penny Palace, undecided as to what level of action he should pursue. He favored the irresistible approach he thought better leave the decision about that for the moment. As he walked into the "treasure room" a ring on his little finger tingled. A transparency was probing him from his right. He walked on, then turned casually to examine the two men from whose direction the impulse had come. Were they employees or independents? Since he always carried about fifty-thousand credits on him, independent sharpers would be a nuisance. He smiled gently as he came up to them.

"I'm afraid not," he said. "Forget any plans you had, eh?"

The heavier of the two men reached into a coat pocket, then shrugged. "You're not carrying a weapon shop gun," he said pointedly. "You're not armed at all."

Hedrock said, "Would you like to test that?" And looked straight at the man's eyes.

The gambler was the first to glance away. "C'mon, Jay," he said. "This job isn't the way I figured it."

Hedrock stopped him as he turned away. "Work here?"

The man shook his head. "Not," he said frankly, "if you're against it."

Hedrock laughed. "I want to see the boss."

"That's what I thought," the man said. "Well, it was a good job while it lasted."

This time Hedrock let them go. He felt no surprise at their reaction. The secret of human power was confidence. And the confidence they had seen in his eyes was rooted in certainties of which most men had never heard. In all the world there had never been a man armed as he was with mental, physical, emotional, neural and molecular defenses.

Lucy's description of Martin's office made it unnecessary for him to explore. He entered the corridor at the back of the gambling section. As he closed the door behind him, a net fell over him, neatly enveloping him. It drew instantly tight and pulled him several feet above the floor. Hedrock made no effort to free himself. There was enough light for him to see the floor five feet below, and the indignity of his position did not disturb him. He had time for several thoughts. So Harj Martin had become wary of uninvited visitors. It proved something; just what, he would leave to the moment of meeting.

He had not long to wait. Footsteps sounded. The door opened, and the fat man came in. He turned on a bright light and stood with a jolly look on his face, staring up at his prisoner. "Well," he said at last, "what have we got here?" He stopped. His eye had caught Hedrock's. Some of the

jolliness faded from his expression. "Who are you?" he snapped.

Hedrock said, "On or about the night of October fifth, you were visited here by a young man named Cayle Clark. What happened?"

"I'll do the questioning," said Martin. Once again his eyes met Hedrock's. "Say," he said querulously, "who are you?"

Hedrock made a gesture. It was very carefully timed and estimated. One of the rings on his fingers dissolved the hard material of the net. It parted beneath him like a door opening. He landed on his feet. He said, "Start talking, my friend. I'm in a hurry."

Ignoring the gun that Martin snatched, he brushed past him into the large office. When he spoke again the confidence was in his voice. It required only a few moments after that for the resigned gambling palace operator to decide on cooperation. "If all you want is information, okay." He added, "Your date is right. It was October fifth about midnight when this guy Clark came in here. He had his twin brother with him."

Hedrock nodded, but said nothing. He was not here for discussion.

"Boy," said Martin, "they were about the most coldblooded twins I ever saw and they worked together like a team. One of them must have had some Army experience because he stood well, you know the hypnotic posture they get. He was the one who knew everything, and was he ever tough! I started to say something about not being a sucker and I got a blast across my legs. I made a bit too fast a move when I turned to pump the money out of the safe and another blast took off some of my hair."

He pointed at a bald spot on one side of his head. Hedrock examined it briefly. It had been close but obviously trained shooting. Weapon shop or Army. By elimination, Army.

"You're all right," he commented.

Martin shuddered. "That guy wasn't worrying whether I was all right or not." He finished, complainingly, "Life is getting too tough. I never knew the normal defense devices of Isher could be so easily nullified."

Outside Hedrock headed for a carplane stop in a meditative mood. The existence of the two Cayles was now established. And one of them had been in the Army long enough to receive more than preliminary officer training. He had had that training on October fifth, a mere one day after Cayle Clark's arrival from Mars. By the morning of the sixth, the day Clark joined the Army, according to the record, he had 500,000 credits.

It was a nice stake for a young man trying to get ahead.

But it scarcely accounted for certain things that were happening. And, large though it was, it was a tiny sum when considered in its relations to Cayle Clark's caliidetic index if the callidity were due to follow a money pattern. His carplane arrived and the thought ended. He had one more call to make this morning Colonel Medlon.

Chapter XXVII

Robert Hedrock returned to his office in the Hotel Royal Ganeel shortly after midday. He examined the reports that had come in during his absence, then spent two hours on a private telestat with an economic expert at the weapon shop Information Center. Then he called the members of the weapon makers' council, and requested an immediate plenary session.

It required about ten minutes for the full council to assemble in the council chambers of the hotel. Dresley opened the meeting. "Looks to me, gentlemen, he said, "as if our coordinator has struck a warm trail. Right, Mr. Hedrock?"

Hedrock came forward smiling. Last time, in speaking to a delegation of this council, he had had the pressures of the time map and the empress on his spirit. The map was still in the building, its problem unsolved, becoming more urgent every hour. But now he had one solution. He began without preliminary. "Gentlemen, on the morning of November twenty-seventh, twelve days hence, we will send a message to the Isher Empress, and request her to end her war. We will accompany our request with facts and figures that will convince her she has no alternative."

He expected a sensation, and he got it. These men knew that, when it came to his job, he was not one to raise false hopes (they had yet to discover that his efficiency was equally great in other fields). Feet stirred, and there was excitement.

Peter Cadron said explosively, "Man! Don't keep us in suspense. What have you discovered?"

"Permit me," said Hedrock, "to recapitulate."

He went on. "Are you aware, on the morning of June third, four thousand seven hundred and eighty-four Isher, a man from the year nineteen hundred and fifty-one A.D. appeared in our Greenway weapon shop. The discovery was then made that the empress was directing a new energy weapon against all Imperial City weapon shops. This energy was a form of atomic power, old in nature but new to science. Its discovery heralds another step forward in our understanding of the complex structure of the space-time tensions that make for the existence of Matter. The source of the energy in Imperial City was a building completed about a year ago and located, on Capital Avenue. Its effect on the Greenway shop differed from its effect on shops further away. Theoretically, it should have destroyed any material structure instantly but, though Isher rulers have never known it, weapon shops are not made of matter in the accepted sense. And so there was an intricate interplay of gigantic forces that took place predominantly in time itself. And so a man came seven hundred years out of the past."

He described briefly, using pure mathematical terms, the seesaw action of the man and the building, once they were launched into the abyss of time. He went on. "There are still people who cannot understand how there can be a time swing, when it is a macrocosmic fact that the sun and its planets move steadily through space-time at twelve-plus miles a second, in addition to which the planets follow an orbital course around the sun at varying speeds. By this logic it should follow that, if you go into the past or future, you will find yourself at some remote point in space, far

from Earth. It is hard for people who think this to realize that space is a fiction, a byproduct of the basic time-energy, and that a matter tension like a planet does not influence phenomena in the time stream, but is itself subject to the time energy laws.

“The reason for the balancing two hours and forty minutes after every swing is obscure, but it has been suggested that nature unrelentingly seeks stability. The building when it swings into the past, occupies the same ‘space’ as it did in normal time but there are no repercussions for the reason that similarity is a function of time itself, not of its tension-product. McAllister started at seven thousand years, the building at two seconds. That is approximate.

“Today, the man is several quadrillions of years away and the building swings at a distance of somewhat less than three months. The fulcrum, of course, moves forward in our time, so that we have the following situation the building no longer swings back in time as far as June third, where the seesaw originally started. Please bear these facts in mind while I turn briefly to another division of this seemingly complicated but basically simple business.”

Hedrock paused. There were quick minds in this room. It interested him to see that every face was still expectant. Now that he himself knew the truth it seemed queer that they had not yet grasped the reality. He continued: * Gentlemen, the Coordination Department discovered some months ago that there existed in the village of Glay a callidetic giant. With so much internal pressure pushing him we had no difficulty maneuvering him into coming to Imperial City. At first, our belief that he would influence events markedly was nullified by his ignorance of Isher realities. I won’t go into the details but he was shipped to

Mars as a common laborer. He was able to return almost immediately."

He went on to explain how Lucy Rail had been married to one Cayle Clark a few hours before the arrival of the ship that brought Cayle Clark back to Earth, how the two Clarks secured 500,000 credits, then visited Colonel Medlon, one of them disguised. The visit was a fortunate one for Medlon. He had just been asked by the empress to produce Clark, or else. A captaincy was conferred on Clark, with the usual hypnotic machine training for officers. The following day he reported to the empress.

"For a reason which she considers to have been impulse, but which is traceable to his callidity, she attached him to her personal staff and he is there now. Wherever his influence extends, he has followed a very interesting pattern of ruthlessly eliminating the more obvious corruption, and this has roused the interest of the ambitious Innelda. Even if nothing else worked in his favor, he would appear to be a young man destined to go far in the Imperial service."

Then Hedrock smiled. "Actually, the Cayle Clark to watch is not the one in the open but the one who remained elusively in the city. It is that Clark who has been making history since last August seventh. In the time since then he has achieved the following successes, and gentlemen, I warn you, you've never heard anything like this before."

In a few sentences, he described what had happened. When he had finished, the table buzzed with excited discussion. At last a man said, "But why marry Lucy Rail?"

"Partly love, partly." Hedrock hesitated. He had asked Lucy a pointed question and her answer made his reply possible

now. "I would say he grew immensely cautious, and began to think of the future. Basic urges came to the fore. Suppose something happened to a man who in a few weeks had accomplished the miracle that he had. Gentlemen, he wanted an heir and Lucy was the only honest girl he knew. It may be a permanent arrangement. I cannot say. Clark, in spite of his rebellion against his parents, is essentially a well-brought up young man. In any event, Lucy will not suffer. She will have the interesting experience of having a child. And, as a wife, she has community property rights."

Peter Cadron climbed to his feet. "Gentlemen," he said, "I move a vote of thanks to Robert Hedrock for the service he has rendered the weapon shops."

The applause was prolonged.

"I move further," said Peter Cadron, "that he be given the rank of unrestricted member."

Once more there were no dissenters. Hedrock bowed his appreciation. The reward was more than an honor. As an unrestricted member he would be subject only to the Pp machine examinations. His movements and actions would never be scrutinized and he could use every facility of the shops as if they were his own property. He had been doing that anyway but in future there would be no suspicion. It was a mighty gift.

"Thank you, gentlemen," he said, when the clapping ended.

"And now," said Peter Cadron, "I respectfully request Mr: Hedrock to leave the council room while we discuss our remaining problem, the seesaw."

Hedrock went out gloomily. He had momentarily forgotten that the greatest danger remained.

Chapter XXVIII

It was November twenty-sixth, one day before the shops intended to inform the empress that her war was lost. She had no premonition. She had come down to the building to see and perhaps, perhaps to do as Captain Clark had suggested. She still felt repelled, though without fear. The feeling that she had was that the Empress of Isher must not involve her own person in hare-brained adventures. Yet the thought had grown, and here she was. At the very least she would watch and wait while Captain Clark and the scientists made the trip. She climbed briskly out of her carplane and looked around her.

In the near distance a concealing haze rose up lazily into the sky, an artificial fog that, for months now, had cut off this city district from the view of the curious. She walked slowly forward, her distinctive Isher face turning this way and that as she examined the scene. She beckoned Captain Clark. "When is the building due?"

The smiling young man saluted briskly. "In seven minutes, Your Majesty."

"Have you all the necessary equipment?"

She listened carefully to his recapitulation. Seven groups of scientists would enter the building, each with his own instrument. It was a pleasure to realize that Captain Clark had personally checked over the lists of machines in each group. "Captain," she glowed, "you're a treasure."

Cayle did not reply. Her praise meant nothing. This girl, who almost literally owned the world, surely did not expect

intelligent people to be absolutely faithful to her in exchange for a few compliments and Army pay. He had no sense of anticipatory guilt and in fact did not regard what he intended to do as being in any way damaging to her. In Isher you did what was necessary and for him there was no turning back. The pattern of his action was already set.

The woman was looking over the scene again. The hole in the ground where the building had been was to her right. To her left was the Greenway weapon shop with its park. It was the first time she had seen one in which the glitter signs were not working. That made her feel better. The shop seemed strangely isolated there in the shadows of its trees. She clenched her hands and thought: "If all the weapon shops in the Solar System were suddenly eliminated the few thousand parklike lots where they had been could so easily be converted into almost anything that, in one generation," she told herself with a dark certainty. "they'd be forgotten. The new children would grow up wondering what mythological nonsense their elders were talking.

"By all the gods of space," she said aloud, passionately, "it's going to happen."

Her words were like a cue. The air shimmered strangely. And where there had been an enormous symmetrical hole abruptly towered a building.

"Right on the minute," said Captain Cayle Clark beside, with satisfaction.

Innelda stared at the structure, chilled. She had watched this process once on a telestat screen. It was different, being on the scene. For one thing the size showed up better. For a quarter of a mile, it reared up into the

heavens, solid in its alloyed steel-and-plastic construction, as wide and long as it was high. It had to be large, of course. The engineers had stipulated oversize vacuums between the various energy rooms. The actual living space inside was tiny. It took about an hour to inspect all the levels.

"Well," said Innelda in a tone of relief, "the place doesn't seem to have been damaged in any way by its experiences. What about the rats?"

The rats had been placed in the building during an earlier appearance. So far, they had showed no sign of being affected. It was wise, though, to verify that they were still unharmed. She waited now in an upper room, glancing intermittently at her watch, as the minutes fled by.

It was annoying to realize that she was nervous. But standing there in the virtual silence of an almost empty building she felt that she was being foolish in that she was even considering going along. She glanced at the men who had volunteered to accompany her if she went. Their silence was not normal and they did not look at her but stood moodily gazing through the transparent wall. There was a sound of footsteps. Captain Clark came striding into view. He was smiling and in his cupped hands he held a white rat. "Your Majesty," he said. "Just look at him. Bright as a button."

He was so cheerful that when he held the little animal out to her she took it and stared down at it thoughtfully. On abrupt impulse, she drew it up and pressed its warm body against her cheek.

"What would we do," she murmured, "without lovely little rats like you?" She glanced at Captain Clark. "Well, sir," she

said, "what is the scientific opinion?"

"Every rat," Cark said, "is organically, emotionally and psychologically sound. All the tests that show rats for what they are were favorable."

Innelda nodded. It fitted. At the beginning, on the day the first attack was launched, before the men inside knew what was happening, the structure had disappeared, causing an immense confusion inside, of which she had never received a coherent account. The moment, on that occasion, the building reappeared, all personnel were withdrawn and no one had been permitted to take the "trip" since then. But physical examinations of the men proved them unharmed.

Still Innelda hesitated. It would look bad now if she failed to go along, but there were so many factors to be considered. If anything happened to her the Isher government might fall. She had no direct heir. The succession would fall to Prince del Curtin, who was popular but known by many people to be out of her favor. The whole situation was ridiculous. She felt hedged in, but there was no use denying the reality.

"Captain," she said firmly, "you have volunteered to take this, journey, whether I go or not. I have definitely decided not to go. I wish you luck and wish, too, that I could go with you. But I'm afraid that I must not. As empress I do not feel free for light-hearted adventures." She held out her hand.
"Go with my blessing."

Less than an hour later, she watched as the building flicked into nothingness. She waited. Food was brought. She ate it in her carplane, read several state papers she had brought along and then, as darkness fell over the capital city of her

empire, saw by her watch that once more the building was due back.

It flashed into view and presently men began to troop out. One of the scientists came over. "Your Majesty," he said, "the journey was accomplished without incident except for one thing. Captain Clark, as you know, intended to leave the building for exploration purposes. He did leave it. We received one message from him, spoken into his wrist 'stat to the effect that the date was August seventh, four thousand and eighty-four Isher. That was the last we heard. Something must have happened to him. He failed to come back in time to make the return journey with us."

"But..." said Innelda. She stopped blankly. Then, "But that means, from August seventh to November twenty-sixth there were two Cayle Clarks in existence, the normal and the one who went back in time."

She paused, uncertain. "The old time paradox," she thought to herself. "Can man go back in time and shake hands with himself?" Aloud, she said wonderingly, "But whatever became of the second one?"

Chapter XXIX

August 7- It was a bright day with a soft blue sky; and a faint breeze blew into Clark's face as he walked rapidly away from the building that had brought him to a period of his own past life. No one bothered him. He wore a captain's uniform with the special red insignia that indicated an Imperial staff member. Sentries posted on streets adjoining the building snapped to attention as he walked by.

In five minutes he was in a public carplane heading purposefully into the heart of the city. He had more than two and a half months to pass before he would be back where he had started, but for what he had in mind the time would be short indeed.

It was late afternoon, but he was able to rent a four-room office before the close of business that day. An employment agency promised to have several stenographers and bookkeepers report by nine a.m. the following morning. And though the place was furnished as an office only, he was able to obtain a cot before dark from a twenty-four-hour rental service. That night, he planned into the early morning hours, and then slept restlessly on the cot. He rose shortly after dawn and, carrying with him the sheet of paper on which he had his calculations, took an elevator down to the exchange room of one of the largest stockbrokerage firms in the city. In his pocket were some five hundred thousand credits which had been given to him by the "second" Cayle Clark. The money was mostly in bills or large denomination, and there were as many of them as one man could burden himself with, and still be able to move.

Before that day had run its course, he had made thirty-seven hundred thousand credits. And the bookkeepers upstairs were busy making records of his stock transactions; the stenographers were beginning to write letters; and a chartered accountant, hastily hired as office manager, hired more help and took on more office space on adjoining floors.

Tired but jubilant, Cayle spent the evening preparing for the next day. He had had one experience of what a man could do who had brought with him from the future complete stock market reports for a period of two and a half months. He slept that night with a sense of exhilaration. He could scarcely wait for the next day. And the next. And the next and the next.

During the month of August, he won ninety billion credits. In that series of deals, he took over one of the chain banks, four billion-credit industrial establishments and obtained partial control of thirty-four other companies.

During the month of September he made three hundred and thirty billion credits, and absorbed the colossal First Imperial Bank, three interplanetary mining corporations and part ownership of two hundred and ninety companies. By the end of September, he was established in a hundred-story skyscraper in the heart of the financial district, and he gave Employment Incorporated the job of setting him up as a big business. On September thirtieth, over seven thousand employees were working in the building.

In October he diverted his cash resources to investment in available hotel and residential properties, a total of three and one-eighth trillion credits worth. In October also, he married Lucy Rail, answered the call from himself just back from Mars and made an appointment to meet the "other"

Clark. The two young men, equally grim and determined, visited the Penny Palace, and secured from Harj Martin the money that had been stolen by the gambling house owner. Actually, the money mattered little at this stage, but there was an important principle involved. Cayle Clark was out to conquer the impersonal world of Isher. And no one who had ever put anything over on him was going to have that satisfaction for long. After Harj Martin, it was a natural step to seek out Colonel Medlon and so prepare to groundwork for the journey into the past.

Two Cayle Clarks really one only, but from different times and that was the story that Robert Hedrock gave to the weapon shop council. That was the phenomenal incident that forced the empress to end her war lest other officers or men wreck the financial stability of the Solar System by trying to repeat the success of Cayle Clark.

Chapter XXX

Outside it was night. Fara walked along the quiet streets of Glay, and for the first time it struck him that the weapon shop Information Center must be halfway around the world, for there it had been day.

The picture vanished as if it had never existed as he grew aware again of the village of Glay asleep all around him. Silent, peaceful yet ugly, he thought, ugly with the ugliness of evil enthroned. He thought: The right to buy weapons and his heart swelled into his throat; the tears came into his eyes. He wiped his vision clear with the back of his hand, thought of Creel's long dead father, and strode on, without shame. Tears were good for an angry man.

The hard, metal padlock yielded before the tiny, blazing power of the revolver. One flick of fire, the metal dissolved, and he was inside. It was dark, too dark to see, but Fara did not turn on the lights immediately. He fumbled across to the window control, turned the windows to darkness vibration, and then clicked on the lights. He gulped with awful relief as he saw that the machines, his precious tools that he had watched the bailiff carry away, were here again, ready for use.

Shaky from the pressure of his emotion, Fara called Creel on the telestat. It took a little while for her to appear; and she was in her dressing gown. When she saw who it was she turned very pale.

“Fara, oh, Fara, I thought.”

He cut her off grimly: "Creel, I've been to the weapon shop. I want you to do this: go straight to your mother. I'm here at my shop. I'm going to stay here day and night until it's settled that I stay ... I shall go home later for some food and clothing, but I want you to be gone by then. Is that clear?"

Color was coming back into her lean, handsome face. She said: "Don't you bother coming home, Fara. I'll do everything necessary. I'll pack all that's needed into the carplane, including a folding bed. We'll sleep in the back room at the shop."

Morning came palely but it was ten o'clock before a shadow darkened the open door; and Constable Jor came in. He looked shamefaced.

"I've got an order here for your arrest," he said.

"Tell those who sent you," Fara replied deliberately, "that I resisted arrest with a gun." The deed followed the words with such rapidity that Jor blinked. He stood like that for a moment, a big, sleepy-looking man, staring at that gleaming, magical revolver; then:

"I have a summons here ordering you to appear at the great court of Ferd this afternoon. Will you accept it?"

"Certainly."

"Then you will be there?"

"I'll send my lawyer," said Fara. "Just drop the summons on the floor there. Tell them I took it."

The weapon shop man had said: "Do not ridicule by word any legal measure of the Imperial authorities. Simply disobey them."

Jor went out, seemingly relieved. It took an hour before Mayor Mel Dale came pompously through the door. "See here, Fara Clark," he bellowed. "You can't get away with this. This is defiance of the law."

Fara was silent as his honor waddled farther into the building. It was puzzling, almost amazing that Mayor Dale would risk his plump, treasured body. Puzzlement ended as the mayor said in a low voice:

"Good work, Fara; I knew you had it in you. There's dozens of us in Glay behind you, so stick it out. I had to yell at you just now because there's a crowd outside. Yell back at me, will you? Let's have a real name calling. But first, a word of warning: the manager of the Automatic Repair Shop is on his way here with his bodyguards, two of them."

Shakily, Fara watched the mayor go out. The crisis was at hand. He braced himself, thought: Let them come, let them.

It was easier than he had expected, for the men who entered the shop turned pale when they saw the holstered revolver. There was a violence of blustering nevertheless, that narrowed down finally to:

"Look here," the man said, "we've got your note for twelve thousand one hundred credits. You're not going to deny you owe that money."

"I'll buy it back," said Fara stonily, "for exactly one thousand credits, the amount actually paid to my son."

The strong-jawed young man looked at him for a long time. "We'll take it," he said finally, curtly.

Fara said: "I've got the agreement here."

His first customer was old man Miser Lan Harris. Fara stared at the long-faced oldster with a vast surmise, and his first, amazed comprehension came of how the weapon shop must have settled on Harris' lot by arrangement. It was an hour after Harris had gone that Creel's mother stamped into the shop. She closed the door.

"Well," she said. "You did it, eh? Good work. I'm sorry if I seemed rough with you when you came to my place, but we weapon-shop supporters can't afford to take risks for those who are not on our side.

"But never mind that. I've come to take Creel home. The important thing is to return everything to normal as quickly as possible."

It was over, Incredibly, it was over. Twice, as he walked home that night, Fara stopped in midstride, and wondered if it had not all been a dream. The air was like wine. The little world of Glay spread before him, green and gracious, a peaceful paradise where time had stood still.

The empress said, Mr. de Lany."

Hedrock bowed. He had disguised himself slightly, and taken one of his long discarded names so that she would not recognize him at some future date.

"You have sought an interview?" said the Empress of Isher.

"As you see."

She toyed with his card. She had on a show-white gown that accentuated the tan of her face and neck. The room in which she received him had been made up to resemble a small south sea island. Palms and green growth surrounded them. And on every side was water, lapping on a beach as

real as nature. A cool wind blew from that restless sea onto Hedrock's back and into her face. The woman gazed bitterly at Hedrock. She saw a man of earnest mien and commanding appearance. But it was his eyes that startled her. They were strong and kind and infinitely brave. She hadn't expected such special qualities. The visitor took on sudden importance. She looked down at the card again.

"Walter de Lany," she said thoughtfully. She seemed to listen to the name as she spoke it, as if she expected it to acquire meaning. Finally she shook her head, wonder-ingly. "How did you get in here? I found this appointment on my list and took it for granted that the chamberlain must have arranged it because it involved necessary business."

Hedrock said nothing. Like so many Imperials, the chamberlain lacked the defensive mind trainings. And, though the empress herself had them, she did not know that the weapon shops had developed energy methods for forcing instantaneous Favorable response from the unprotected. The woman spoke again.

"Very strange," she said.

Hedrock said, "Reassure yourself, Madam. I have come to solicit your mercy on behalf of an unfortunate, guiltless man."

That caught her. Once more her eyes met his, flinched from the strength that was there, then steadied.

Hedrock said, quietly, "Your Majesty, you are in a position to do an act of unparalleled kindness to a man who is nearly five million years from here, swinging from past to future as your building forces him ever further away."

The words had to be spoken. He expected her to realize instantly that only her intimates and her enemies would know certain details about the vanishing building. The way the color drained from her cheeks showed that she was realizing.

“You’re a weapon shop man?” she whispered. She was on her feet. “Get out of here,” she breathed. “Out!”

Hedrock stood up. “Your Majesty,” he said, “control yourself. You are in no danger.”

He intended his words to be like a dash of cold water. The suggestion that she was afraid brought splashes of color into her face. She stood like that for a moment and then, with a quick movement, reached into the bosom of her dress and drew out a gleaming white energy weapon. “If you do not leave instantly,” she said, “I shall fire.”

Hedrock held his arms away from his body like a man being searched. “An ordinary gun,” he said in amazement, “against a man who carries a weapon shop defensive? Madam,” he said, “if you will listen to me for a moment.”

“I do not,” said the empress, “deal with weapon shop people.”

That was merely irritating. “Your Majesty,” said Hedrock in a level voice, “I am surprised that you make such immature statements. You have not only been dealing with the shops the last few days, you have yielded to them. You have been compelled to end the war and to destroy your time-energy machines. You have agreed not to prosecute the officer-deserters but only to discharge them. And you have granted immunity to Cayle Clark.”

He saw in her face that he had not touched her. She was staring at him, frowning. "There must be a reason," she said, "that you dare to talk to me like this."

Her own words seemed to galvanize her. She turned back to her chair and stood with finger poised over the ornamental arm. "If I should press this alarm," she said, "it would bring guards."

Hedrock sighed. He had hoped she would not force him to reveal his power. "Why not, then," he suggested, "press it?" It was time, he thought, that she found out her true situation.

The woman said, "You think I won't?" Firmly, her extended finger pressed downward.

There was silence except for the lapping of the waves and the soft sound of the lifelike breeze. After at least two minutes Innelda, ignoring Hedrock as if he did not exist, walked twenty feet to a tree, and touched one of the branches. It must have been another alarm, because she waited not so long this time and then walked hurriedly over to the thick brush that concealed the elevator shaft. She activated its mechanism and, when there was no response, came slowly back to where Hedrock waited, and sat down in her chair. She was pale but composed. Her eyes did not look at him but her voice was calm and without fear. "Do you intend to murder me?"

Hedrock shook his head, but said nothing. More strongly now, he regretted that he had had to reveal to her how helpless she could be, particularly regretted it because she would undoubtedly start modernizing the defenses of the palace in the mistaken belief that she was protecting herself against superior weapon shop science. He had come

here this afternoon prepared for any emergency, physical or mental. He could not force her to do what he wanted but his fingers blazed with offensive and defensive rings. He had on his "business" suit and even weapon shop scientists would have been amazed at the variety of his armor. In his vicinity no alarm energies would come to life and no guns would operate. It was the day of the greatest decision in the history of the Solar System, and he had come mightily girded.

The woman's eyes were staring at him with somber intensity. "What do you want?" she said. "What about this man you mentioned?"

Hedrock told her about McAllister.

"Are you mad," she whispered when he had finished. "But why so far, The building is only three months."

"The ruling factor seems to be mass."

"Oh!" Silence then. "But what do you want me to do?"

Hedrock said, "Your Majesty, this man commands our pity and our mercy. He is floating in a void whose like no human eyes will ever see again. He has looked upon our Earth and our sun in their infancy and in their old, old age. Nothing can help him now. We must give him the surcease of death."

In her mind Innelda saw the night he pictured. But she was more intent now, seeing this event in its larger environment. "What," she said, "about this machine you have?"

"It is a duplicate of the map machine of the weapon shops." He didn't explain that he had built it in one of his secret

laboratories. "It lacks only the map itself, which was too intricate to fashion swiftly."

"I see." Her words were automatic, not a real response. She studied his face. She said slowly, "Where do you fit into all this?"

It was a question that Hedrock was not prepared to answer. He had come to the Empress of Isher because she had suffered a defeat and, her position being what it was, it was important that she should not remain too resentful. An immortal man, who was once more interfering in the affairs of mortals, had to think of things like that. "Madam," he said, "there is no time to waste. The building is due here again in one hour."

The woman said, "But why cannot we leave this decision to the weapon shop council?"

"Because they might make the wrong decision."

"What," persisted Innelda, "is the right decisoon?"

Sitting there, Hedrock told her.

Cayle Clark set the controls so that the carplane would make a wide circle around the house.

"Oh, my goodness!" said Lucy Rail Clark. "Why it's one of these up-in-the-air places."

She stopped and stared with wide, wondering eyes at the grounds below, at the hanging gardens at the house floating in the air. "Oh, Cayle," she said, "are you sure we can afford it?"

Cayle Clark smiled. "Darling, I've explained to you a dozen times, I'm not going to do it again."

She protested. "That isn't what I mean. Are you sure the empress will let you get away with it?"

Cayle Clark gazed at his wife with a faint, grim smile. "Mr. Hedrock," he said slowly, "gave me a weapon shop gun. And besides, I did a great deal for Her Majesty which at least, so she told me on the telestat today she appreciates. She doesn't dissemble very much, so I have agreed to continue to work for her in much the same way."

"Oh!" said Lucy.

"Now don't get yourself upset," said Cayle. "Remember, you yourself told me that the weapon shops believed in one government. The more that government is purified the better off the world will be. And believe me." his face hardened "I've had just enough experience to make me want to purify it."

He landed the carplane on the roof of the five-story residence. He led Lucy into the interior, down into the world of bright, gracious rooms where she and he would live forever.

At least, at twenty-two or three, it seemed as if it would be forever.

Epilogue

McAllister had forgotten about the personal de-cision he intended to make. It was so hard to think in this darkness. He opened his tired eyes, and saw that he was poised moveless in black space. There was no earth under him. He was in a time where the planets did not yet exist. The darkness seemed to be waiting for some colossal event.

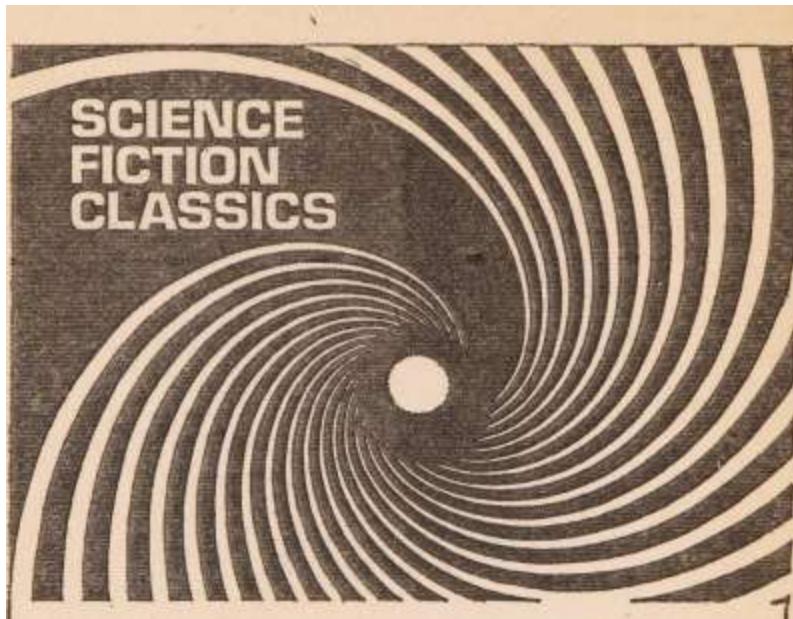
Waiting for him.

He had a sudden flash of understanding of what was going to happen. Wonder came then, and a realization of what his decision must be: resignation to death.

It was a strangely easy decision to make. He was so weary. Bitter-sweet remembrance came of the days in far-gone time and space, when he had lain half-dead on a battlefield of the middle twentieth century, resigned to personal oblivion. Then he had thought that he must die so that others might live. The feeling now was the same, but stronger and on a much higher level.

How it would be worked he had no idea. But the seesaw would end in the very remote past, with the release of the stupendous temporal energy he had been accumulating with each of those monstrous swings.

He would not witness but he would aid in the formation of the planets.



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